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Graham Sleight

Putting the Pieces Together Again: Making Sense of Damon Knight's *Humpty Dumpty*

Damon Knight is not principally known as a novelist. His impact on the SF field was elsewhere—as editor, anthologist, teacher, critic, founder of the Clarion workshop, first president of SFWA, and author of such stories as “To Serve Man.” However, he did produce a number of novels, from *Hell’s Pavement* (1955) through *Why Do Birds* (1992) and, finally, *Humpty Dumpty: An Oval* (1996). *Humpty Dumpty* received little attention on its release and has subsequently almost slipped from view. I want to try to provide some explanations for this neglect, to suggest some parallels with other works, and to offer some paths into what I consider an extraordinary and rewarding book.

The novel is told in the first person by Wellington “Bill” Stout, an American who wakes in a Milan hospital to find that he has been shot and is, at least partly, amnesiac. He is told (23) that a bullet has lodged in his brain, that it cannot be removed, and that at some point it will kill him. From the beginning of the book, he hears voices, “Whispering or muttering in the distance, old women’s voices by the sound of them” (11).

So we are cued from the start that the bullet may be causing Wellington to hallucinate. Even in the first few pages, he records events that are borderline fantastic: in the middle of explaining the consequences of the shooting, Wellington’s doctor tells him that he, the doctor, has recently left his wife (24); and Wellington then reads in a newspaper that a planet has been sighted approaching the Earth and has been named Mongo. Shortly thereafter, Wellington is lured into a meeting with a conspiratorial group of mysterious Dentists known collectively as “the Crowns”; the meeting is held in a cavern close to the center of the earth lit with the eerie yellow radiance of the element cesium.

Through these incidents—and the novel is astonishingly swift in its moves from reality to fantasy—a backstory emerges. Wellington, aged 64, came to Italy for the wedding in Rome of his stepdaughter, Cicely. He was shot by a man called Emilio da Liongliu while eating in a Milan restaurant. Wellington has made his living selling women’s lingerie and is pretty well off as a result. He has a flat in London and an older brother named Tom. Indeed, it was at Tom’s insistence that Wellington was in Milan: Tom asked Wellington to drop off a sensitive item with a friend. This item—which may be a microdot and which was supposedly in Wellington’s possession when he was shot—is the McGuffin which drives the fantastic plot of *Humpty Dumpty*. Wellington, uncertain what the item is, spends the bulk of the book trying to retrieve it, while various entities—the Dentists, members of the “Space Patrol,” and figures from his past—interfere. Wellington returns to the United States and visits the two towns where he spent his childhood: Potomac, Pennsylvania and Seawiew, Oregon. He meets people who are long dead, his mother among them, while other shards of his past are reconnected or transformed in his narrative.

Special Other Views Issue

Graham Sleight on Damon Knight’s *Oval*
Gabriel Trujillo Muñoz on Andrade’s *Aurosia*
Mark Rich on Two Allen Steele Stories
Jeremy Adam Smith on SF Film Directors
David Mead on M. John Harrison
Paul Kincaid on Kim Stanley Robinson
Greg Beatty on Marleen Barr’s Anthology
Plus Advice from a Bookdealer, SF in Mexican DNA, some Screed & an Editorial!

Gabriel Trujillo Muñoz Aurosia, the Utopian Planet: Jorge Carrera Andrade’s Latin American Vision

If we think about the American continent as the first European explorers of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries saw it, it is evident that these new lands were the very personification of a new world, a separate reality, with colors and plants distinct from their own, with fruits and beings that were, on many occasions, beyond their comprehension. In reality the discovery of America was the first reported episode of the encounter with the other as if such a scene were an episode of science fiction that only could be articulated, in words and images, some centuries later.

The awakening of the consciousness of the West to other worlds had, then, its first realization in American lands and, for that very reason, this continent became the repository of the utopian efforts of many writers and reformers from the age of discovery to our own days. Even Thomas More’s *Utopia* itself is located on an island of the New [i.e. West] Indies and many chronicles of Spanish, Portuguese, English, and French explorers have the tone of astonishment in the presence of the novelty of a land different from those they had known beforehand.

In the literature of the twentieth century and especially beginning with *El Canto General* by Pablo Neruda, this transparent look into the face of the American world was transformed rapidly into a utopian hymn. The reasons were obvious. The literary vanguard of the first half of this century would have placed emphasis on the primordial geography of the world in its mythic and ancestral realities, at the same time that the dominant ideology of many cosmogonist poets was no longer a Modernist mysticism but rather the vision of dialectical materialism and its utopian cargo that demanded the creation of a new man, of a society without classes. The future, from the communist perspective of the mid-twentieth century, is the promise of changing

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What We Did Last Summer, 2004



Somewhere in New Hampshire, an unusual imperative



Zane Medrum, Mrs. & Mr. Michael Kandel, and Kathryn & James Morrow attend the Literary Beer at Confluence in Pittsburgh



Phil & Fruma Klass industriously signing at Confluence.



Kathryn Cramer, Constance & Janice Hartwell in Maine



Left at SFRA, the Machine Theater presents a parody A Putnamian Interpretation of the Sock Puppet genre.



Right: Pilgrim award-winner Edward James at the SFRA in Skokie, Illinois

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Auroasia, the Utopian Planet

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life and transforming reality for the benefit of the whole of humanity. It is the utopia of the "planetary man," as it was called by the Ecuadorian poet Jorge Carrera Andrade (1903–1978), a contemporary of Neruda and a sage observer of his land, that is, his country and the people who inhabit it, but also of the human condition as a communal life and "a world in ruins" where innocents are sacrificed. For that, Carrera Andrade asserts in his book *Planetary Man* (second edition, 1959), that he is the "crewman of all the windows/ of the land stunned by motors . . . /and I am the rest of the people of the planet." A singer who glimpses in the future a hope of harmony, "a treaty of peace until death," now that:

There will come a day purer than the others:
peace will burst over the land
like a crystal sun. A new brilliance
will envelop things.
The people will sing on the roads
now freed from cunning death.
Wheat will grow over the remains
of destroyed arms
and no one will shed
the blood of his brother.
The world will be then from the fountains
and the corn ears that will impose their dominion
of abundance and freshness without borders.
The ancients so alone, in the Sunday
of their gentle lives
will cover death with matting,
natural death, the end of the journey,
landscape more beautiful than the direction of sunset.

The critic Vladimir Rivas Iturralde has said in Carrera Andrade's *Collected Poems* (2000) that this poet has realized a work that is "a single great poem of gifts, a single great inventory of the brief earthly things . . . In a manner very different from philosophy, amazement is at the root of this poetry. Amazement does not now mean only exclamation. It signifies, for the poet who concerns me, a perplexity before the certainty of the exterior world, a questioning gaze, a method of work." Hence, apart from celebrating nature he describes "those new protagonists of contemporary history: the machines, the great cities, the labor strikes, the street demonstrations." Carrera Andrade was not a social poet like Neruda with a political agenda under his arm, but rather a photographer of reality and the veils which cover it. He is a singer of the living, the insignificant, the marginal. A perceptive poet, alert, with five senses open to the world. He is the guardian of the paradise that he constructs verse by verse, as he shows, in explicit and vehement form, in his poet-utopia, "Auroasia," which appears in the first edition of *Planetary Man* (1957):

All is gold in Auroasia, the remote planet
where the night times
are clearer than the day.
The beings that inhabit it, more human than man,
live in peace digging their gold-bearing mines.
Fortunate planet. New World without wild beasts
or fear, without old age or mental anguish.
Youths of one hundred years, vigorous and lucid
in the gardens of gold they are waiting for death.
Everything is free in Auroasia: the water, the air, the ground.
Even the wheat is wild and the bread is for everyone.
Silent machines move, dig, build,
produce light, transform gold into a thousand things.

Auroasia is a planet of magnanimous giants
always smiling: they form a single family,
a single nation without inventions of death,
and its peaceful flag is the color of the sun.

Sailors of space, they visit other worlds

and they know the map of the heavens by heart.
Friends of the birds and the lowest things
they cultivate flowers of gold with loving hands.

Adams of blue, more perfect than man,
lords of a planetary paradise
where mothers always are young and virgin
in their kingdoms of fountains, of apples and birds.

As Carrera Andrade himself explains in his text "Ordering a Universe" (1940), "there is a blended and changing immediate universe, composed of small beings which our hands can move at will and arrange them in more or less harmonious orders. In this brief animated universe, which surrounded me from childhood, I could indicate my favorite friendships [Query: One dictionary has an obsolete meaning of "inclination" which sounds good here] and deliver myself to a species of game, cosmic and insignificant, although significant [i.e. expressive]." Almost twenty years later, Auroasia is equally significant but now implies a transcendence born of the defense of humanity as a whole—diverse, yes, but indissoluble:

The women of Auroasia have bodies of gold.
They are jugs of honey with throats of music.
On their shoulders of light and their breasts of adols
there are flowers on balances, there are metals and feathers.

From Auroasia, the children can look at Earth
and know our incredible history: the races
that are hated, the thirst for gold, the conquest
and extermination of peoples at the edge of a sword.

Earth: old planet, slowed in the cosmos
with millions of years, refuge of the beings
most primary and minimal in the universe, ants
of blue, struggling under the foot of death!

The distance between Auroasia and Earth is measured
Not only in light-years across nothingness
But also in love-years, in centuries of tenderness.
The earthling is not capable of covering the distance.

Auroasia: New World without serpents or arrows:
the enjoyment of living runs in your springs.
No one has seen a tear in the history of Auroasia,
(There is one in the museum, converted to diamond.)

The trees of Auroasia give more fruit than leaves
four times a year. There are four full moons
in the sky without clouds,
and there are seen four times as many stars as on Earth.

The utopia of Jorge Carrera Andrade is, as indicated by Vladimir Rivas Iturralde, a work where amazement must fight, hand to hand, with "a world delivered to the dealers of news and of money." In the poetry of this era (1950–1978), "magic appears, with the intent of answering the perpetual questions on the origin of life, the cult of the circle: of the *sera*, of the *aeon*, of the *sun*. He invents poetic utopias. Auroasia which is situated at the same time in the Indian past and a hypothetical future." In this manner, Auroasia becomes one of the simplest and most sensible [i.e., perceivable by the senses] futurist stories of twentieth-century Latin American poetry, where Auroasia appears as the vital and loving counterpart to all that earthly humanity has not been able to do to the benefit of its own species. The new world is no longer in America but rather in outer space, on other planets light-years from ours, where there still is "the enjoyment of living" and there are no "serpents or arrows." It is important to observe here that our poet is a man who does not miss a detail of his time, of technological advances and space exploits. So, in his poem "Book of Exile," published in the book *Natural Mysteries* (1972), but written in 1969, he explains that in July of that year he was a witness to a prodigy of the human will on behalf of exploration and the opening of new frontiers which in the end are only dust, shadow, nothing:

July burns in the bushes.
For the first time man disembarks on the moon.
Humanity had seen with its astounded eyes

the silent voyage of the ship
through the empty immensity of the heavens.
Only mute darkness
Around the sailors of space.

The metallic dwelling rests
on the lunar ground.
There is not a drop of water nor a speck of grass.
There is only the ash of the centuries
the dust of death:
oh Sahara of the heavens
immense perishable catafalque
where is marked the passage of men,
vain conquerors of nothing.

With a certain irony, our author contemplates his era as a mix of industry and massacre: "I tell you, our century is fabulous," a kingdom with "flying machines," "mechanical musicians and identical houses," a civilization "obedient to signals and luminous ciphers,/throbbing wasps of the walls," as he asserts in his poem "The Earthlings," in his collection *New Poems* (1955). There he explains his disagreement with the world situation and his impulse to seize, with the high science of poetry, the dreams that make of each human being a unique and distinctive person:

I tell you: our century is fabulous.
The twilight of Man
surrounded by huge numbers of earthlings
without eyes to see clouds or flowers,
only nourished with gold,
incapable of hearing the music of the world,
apprentices or larvae of the next Automaton.

Earthlings who bury statues,

wall up books,
throw into the sea the keys to the planet,
fail to recognize the fly,
put everything on sale, even moonlight,
proclaim the worldwide massacre of swans
as raw material for a new industry

Earthlings the same in their appearance and wardrobe
and empty inside,
deniers of the sun, beings of shadow,
phalanxes of yawning and of forgetting,
immense uprising
against Man and its world of love and wonder
to install the kingdom of Hollow Words.

There do not exist springs
in the earthing City
In dwellings of glass
eternal thirst lives.
The thirst lies in torrents of automobiles
Toward neon constellations and returns
in its mortal round of colored insects.

Oh fabulous century!
The planet contemplates the agony
of the last men
harassed without end by the earthlings
dynamic, identical
who advance entombing pictures and books,
final stronghold of human dreams.

And then in the sunset of his life, in his collection *Terrrestrial Vocation* (1972), Jorge Carrera Andrade had enough will of soul to continue singing of the dawn and the dew, of nature in abundance and

Bernardo Fernández (BEF) Part of My DNA: SF in My Life

Growing up in Mexico City during the 1970s was like living on a late '50s/early '60s TV plateau.

At last, so it was for me, a member of the Mexican Generation X.

Being so, my first contact with science fiction must have been the old American TV shows that were broadcast by the local channel 5, though I can't remember exactly which one was the very first, no matter how I squeeze my brain.

Here I have to stop to evoke some context. Most of the Mexican media are devoted to local soap operas and pop music. This is what you'd call *Mex trash*, our lowest common denominator. Channel 5 was the only station that featured Spanish-dubbed American shows, so it's no wonder that Mexican kids from my generation grew up watching classics like *The Munsters*, *The Addams Family*, *Benanza*, *Combat!* and a great share of SF classics such as *Star Trek* (which I never related to), *Land of the Giants*, *Time Tunnel* (a local favorite though I know it is not that big in the U.S.A.), *Lost In Space*, *Space: 1999*, *Thunderbirds*, *The Planet of the Apes* TV show and short lived animated cartoon, *Legion's Run*, *Voyage to the Bottom of the Sea* and a bunch of cartoons that included Japanese cartoons such as *Astro Boy* (my personal favorite), *Ultraman*, *Mazinger-Z*, and many others.

That primal media environment was the seed of my artistic vocation. Being a cartoon lover, I first became a comic book fan, which eventually lead to me going to college to major in graphic design. But the very first contact I had with written SF was at the age of 11.

I was in fifth grade and my father insisted that I should read Jules Verne's *Mikhiel Stragoff*. I swear I tried! But along the way, I came across a copy of *Fahrenheit 451*. And yes, I got hooked in by the poetic-yet-very-low-tech prose of good old Ray Bradbury. *F-451* became the first novel I ever read, even though I came to fully

understand it only when I reread it as an adult.

But the damage was done: I was a SF junkie from then on. As the years passed, I became an avid reader of all kinds of books (classics, literature, science, historic essays, short stories) but I've kept coming back to my first literary love, which was consolidated when in 1984, at twelve, I went to see *Blade Runner*, only to become a hard core SF buff.

It was reading a SF graphic novel, *Watchmen* by Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons, that made me decide to become an SF author. I and started to formally write SF stories in an editorial environment (the Spanish-language market) where our genre is usually considered as a minor contribution to popular culture.

I've been lucky. I've been included in several important anthologies. So far, I've published a short story collection and two children's books, all of them SF. A fourth book, a new short story collection, is on its way and a couple of full length novels are in the middle of their respective editorial processes. Last year I was also given an official grant from the National Fund for the Arts to edit and publish a Mexican science-fiction comics anthology, which will be released next summer. Science fiction! It's a part of my DNA now. It has not only changed my life as a reader and creator, it has been very generous to me! ▶

BEF (Bernardo Fernández, 1972), a Mexican cartoonist and SF writer, has been publishing on the Mexican alternative press circuit since the early '90s. He's the co editor and designer of SUB, an almost-yearly anthology. He published the short story collection ¡Bzzzzzz!! and the children's SF books *Error de programación* (A programming mistake) and *Cuento de hadas para conejos* (Bedtime stories for bunnies). His new short story collection *El llanto de los niños muertos* (Cry of the dead children) and *Pulpo Comics*, a Mexican SF comics anthology, will both be published soon.

of the world past, present, and future, knowing that he was an inhabitant of "a century dazzled by false paradises," but that he was still a messenger of the light which lights "to abolish the kingdom of Darkness, and to restore to man the heritage of light transformed/into love of the things of the planet." Because of this, in his utopia in verse, *Aurosa*, machines serve humanity and not the reverse. And so it is that *Aurosa*, the utopian planet, is clearly a close relative to the red planet of the Italian-Mexican writer Narciso Genovesi (1911-1982), who at this same time would publish his novel *I Have Born on Mars* (1958), where the fear of massive destruction, by the cold war between the then-superpowers, the USSR and the United States, made him put his hope in the future: in a better society, more prudent and reasonable in its thinking and acting than ours.

Carrera Andrade carried out, in *Aurosa*, an act of expiation for all the faults and blindnesses of human civilization. Like a mirror that reflects the kind of society that we could come to be if we exert ourselves to leave behind violence, misery, miserliness between beings

and peoples and nations. Don Jorge succeeded, with this poem, in centering the attention of Latin American literature on a world that escaped the Manichaeism of left and right and that took a third way outside the voracious industrialism that communists and capitalists equally shared: the return to a bonding with nature, with life as the supreme value. The future as a return to our roots, to a mean that sustains us without losing its diverse and contrasting spirit, its exuberance and its richness.

Jorge Carrera Andrade was, in his life and in his work, a man who came to this world with a single purpose and in *Aurosa* shows it with complete lustrelessness: to live with us, to sing for us the terrestrial adventure. This amazing voyage to construct a paradise in our image and likeness, in the possible time that is our passage through life and in the infinite time occupied by the word, the original home of utopia. ►

Gabriel Trujillo Muñoz lives in Calexico, California. Translated by Christine Quinlan.

The Rebellion of the Beasts by Leigh Hunt

Chicago: Wicker Park, 2004; \$21.95 hc; 168 pages
reviewed by Walter Minkel

George Orwell's *Animal Farm*, first published in 1945, is one of those books that almost everyone who has gone to college has at least heard of. A satire that uses the pigs, sheep, horses, and dogs on a British farm to act out the story of the Soviet Union from the Russian Revolution to the eve of the Second World War, it challenges its readers to grasp how revolutions that seem justified can bring about totalitarianism. Pigs that stand in for Lenin, Stalin, and Trotsky force readers to see a familiar story with new eyes. Even the newest generation of students, who grew up in a world without the Soviet Union and wouldn't know Trotsky from a tricycle, can see the same story reenacted in Iraq, in Africa, and in other countries around the world.

Few of those readers know that a similar satire—in which all the animals of Europe rise in rebellion and then fall into battle among themselves—had been written 120 years earlier. *The Rebellion of the Beasts*, or, *The As is Dead! Long Live the As!*, first appeared in 1825. As far as scholars have been able to determine, Orwell never read this tale, but the similarities are too great not to wonder whether he had.

Its author, James Henry Leigh Hunt (1784-1859), although nearly forgotten today, was highly regarded as one of the wisest minds of his time. Hunt spent two years (1813-1815) in prison for libeling the Prince Regent in the pages of a political newspaper, the *Examiner*, which he published with his brother John Hunt. (Fantasy scholar Douglas A. Anderson writes in his introduction to this new edition that "The incarceration was fairly gentle, for Leigh's family spent most of the time in an adjoining set of rooms, from which he was able to continue editing the *Examiner*.") Hunt was also a poet and a good friend of Percy Shelley and John Keats—and Keats's poem "Written on the Day that Mr. Leigh Hunt Left Prison," is easy to find on the web.

The Rebellion of the Beasts is a work so critical of the British monarchy and government that it's not surprising that its title page lists the anonymous author as a "Late Fellow of St. John's College, Cambridge." But the British Library identifies Hunt as its author, as do scholars who have compared the book with his other writings.

The initial chapters of *Rebellion of the Beasts* are funny, even a little edgy in an early-nineteenth-century way. Hunt's first-person protagonist is John Sprat, the son of a wealthy Quaker, who rebels against the strictures of his upbringing. With some friends he breaks into Cambridge's heavily guarded Magdalene College library just to satisfy his curiosity. There he steals a magical manuscript by Cornelius Agrippa, *De Bestis*, which includes a formula that will allow the concocter to be able to understand and speak the language of animals. Here is a portion of that formula: "Thou must then make a mess of two inches of a tallow candle, the hair of an ass's tail, the tooth of a horse that is broken-winded, a half-pound of witch-elm leaves, two she-snails, the parings of the toenails of a doctor of divinity, one drop of blood from a man learned in mathematics, three leaves of Aristotle's *Ethics*, and a pint of linseed oil" (9-10).

After eating a bit of this "mess" every day for forty days, and following other complex directions, Sprat speaks a secret litany into the ear of a donkey, and it replies to him, amazed that such a magician has appeared and spoken to him. Then the donkey warns Sprat: "I will not hesitate to tell you that there is a grand conspiracy amongst all the beasts in the world, to liberate themselves from the tyranny of mankind" (16).

Sprat quickly enters a world in which animals tell him horrendous stories of their abuse at the hands of their cruel human masters. The donkey tells him how the chimney sweep who owns him beats him incessantly; a cow recounts how her calf was brutally taken away from her and murdered by butchers before her eyes. Sprat listens sympathetically and promises to do what he can to help (he had already purchased the donkey from his cruel master), and the animals respond in kind. He is even woken that night by the "small, though shrill, voice" of a flea, who says that he and all other bugs had agreed never to bite him.

Things move quickly after that. Sprat becomes the representative of all the animals and carries a petition to the King, demanding that animals be given liberty and respect. But when Sprat takes the petition to the King, he is shuffled from one under-funkiness to the other, and at last reaches a secretary, who tells him that the King will dismiss it, as he dismisses all petitions that demand reform. The secretary writes out the automatic responses to all such petitions, and Sprat must inform the animals that His Majesty refuses to hear it.

So the animals revolt. Horses and donkeys kick people to death; others are stung and bitten by insects. At last the animals rule and put the humans into slavery. Only Sprat, who had aided the animals, is kept on as an adviser. An ass, one of the leaders of the revolt, through clever intrigue has himself proclaimed leader of the new republic, and at last proclaimed himself. But other intrigues among the animals lead to war, in which millions die.

What, exactly, did this story mean in its day? Was Hunt suggesting that if the monarch didn't pay sufficient attention to the suffering masses, they would revolt as the French had? And if they did revolt, everyone would suffer? And if they did suffer, would it be because the masses had never had the opportunity to govern themselves, or because they were unwashed, uneducated, and unable to govern themselves—in other words, were the masses aware?

Anderson avoids these questions, but as we watch the struggles in Iraq, in which President Bush—who claims that he wants the Iraqis to govern themselves—appears unwilling to give up control of that country unless the Iraqis create the kind of government he wants them to have, we can't help but wonder how prescient Hunt was in 1825. *The Rebellion of the Beasts*, like *Animal Farm*, is a story that never grows old, because too many variations of it keep popping up. And they probably always will. ►

Walter Minkel lives in Forest Hills, New York.

Light by M. John Harrison

London: Gollancz, 2002; \$26.95 hc; 320 pages

reviewed by David Mead

In particles bright
The jewels of Light
Distinct shone & clear

—William Blake, "To Mr. Thomas Butts"

M. John Harrison is a writer who should be more widely published and read in the United States, but whose complex, difficult writing—and apparent indifference to the demands of the marketplace—have made his fiction something to be sought out, not found easily at the big chain bookstores. Reading *Light*, you can see why the big chain buyers and American publishers might be put off—almost every character in this story is a twisted, dysfunctional monster of some sort. Indeed, the person we expect to be the hero, and who is in a very odd way a hero, turns out also to be a serial murderer who seems to have very little to do with his own fame. Yet this is a terrific book and deserves to be read!

Harrison is perhaps best known here for several early works, *The Centauri Device* (1974) and the *Viriconium* fantasy cycle, which includes *The Pastel City*, *A Storm of Wings*, *In Viriconium* (a.k.a. *The Floating Gods*) and a collection of short stories, *Viriconium Nights*. Long out of print in the United States, the *Viriconium* books were republished in an omnibus edition by Gollancz in 2000 as part of their Millennium Fantasy Masterworks line. Similarly, his more recent work is primarily available in English editions, including *Light*, which also appeared in paperback in September 2003. Fortunately, Bantam has just released it in an American edition.

Light, insight, revelation, creation. So many of our metaphors are founded upon the experience of suddenly seeing—in darkness, for the first time, the meaning of things. To achieve revelation, of course, one must be in the dark, ignorant, mistaken; thus Harrison's story begins in darkness and ignorance, branding three distinct yet related narrative lines describing sad, desperate failures.

The first of these lines is the story of Michael Kearney, a mathematical physicist living in the early twenty-first century. Kearney and his partner Brian Tate are studying paired ion interactions, attempting to create a quantum-level computer. As they model their results, mapping the "decoherence free subspace of an ion pair," Kearney sees in the patterns a terrifying figure, a figure that has haunted him since his childhood. He calls this demon "the Shrander," and he has repeatedly tried to exorcise it by murdering women at random. It is no figment of his imagination; the creature has actually spoken to him. Kearney has taken a set of mysterious dice from the Shrander's home. Kearney's life is a frightened nightmare; everything he does seeks to discover the underlying patterns of existence, and everything he finds drives him to murder and flight.

The second story Harrison tells describes the violent life of Seria Mau, the cyborged pilot of a spaceship called *The White Cat*. Somewhat like Helga in Anne McCaffrey's "Ship Who Sang" stories, Seria is (wired into) her warship, but unlike Helga, Seria is an angry sociopath who murders with indifference. She has made herself a machine in order to escape the emotional demands made on her by her family.

The third plot follows Ed Chianese, an adventurer who has become addicted to total immersion escapism illusions. A "twink," Ed lives only to earn enough to get out of himself and into a dream, where he can "live" as a stereotypical Raymond-Chandleresque hardboiled dick in a stereotypical hardboiled detective novel. Ed, once famous along "the Beach" as a daredevil adventurer who had done everything worth doing, now does all the things you shouldn't do—to escape dealing with his unhappy childhood.

Kearney inhabits a dreary near-future London (the post-Thatcherque city of night we have come to expect from English writers like China Miéville and Paul McAuley). Ed Chianese and Seria Mau live some four hundred years later, along "the Beach," a littoral of stars, planets, planetoids, artificial satellites, and general space junk

bordering the galaxy's strangest place, the Kefahuchi Tract. This is a region of space surrounding a naked singularity—a hole in space/time out of which unimaginable changes might emerge, a treasure to be exploited by any person or species capable of going into this heart of darkness/heart of light and coming out again.

The Beach is littered with technical detritus abandoned over millions of years by an endless parade of star travelers who have come to master the Tract and who have failed utterly and vanished. Many of these ancient alien species possessed amazing technologies, far beyond anything humanity has mastered by the twenty-fifth century. All that humans can do is mine the ancient abandoned technologies, hoping to find some technological key that will unlock the Tract. Naturally, we are not alone; other people, like the insectile Nastic and humanoid New Men, also want the key to the Tract—and all are prepared to go to war for these dusty scraps. Along the Beach, the stuff most sought after is "K-tech," the remains of a race that vanished a million years ago. Nearly sentient software retrieved from K-culture flotsam and jetsam powers Seria Mau's warship, and the craving for K-tech fuels the clash between Nastic and humans, although both species would plunder the Tract itself if they could.

War, decay, and darkness pervade Harrison's story, which deliberately contrasts the sad lives of his characters and their cultures to the glorious and ungraspable radiance of the Tract, symbol of all dreams and desires. Michael Kearney, locked into a childhood power and sex fantasy that has left him an emotional and sexual cripple, is traumatized by the Shrander's offer of infinity and transfiguration. Through murder he tries to exorcise (deny, murder) his terrible insight that our objective reality is an illusion, that things are not what they seem, that information is a substance, that mathematics is alive and operating on the most fundamental stuff of the cosmos. In the end, only the selfless love of his ex-wife Anna, herself a self-destructive emotional wreck, makes it possible for Kearney to face the Shrander and accept the liberation offered by a new way of seeing.

Some 400 years later, Seria Mau introduces herself by murdering several spacecraft full of human K-tech treasure hunters, a privateer in a war being waged by the Nastic against humanity. She is without love and without pity; she has made herself into *The White Cat* in order to escape from the demands of her grieving widowed father and her brother, and also to see the glories of the Tract. She's crushed all human feeling and abandoned the flesh for the bodiless joy of being *The White Cat*, the bally of the Beach. The only problem for Seria is figuring out how to operate a piece of K-tech she's bought from Dr. Zip, a famous gene-tailor on Motel Splendido. Her search for answers will bring her deep into the Beach, where she too will meet the Shrander, the *deus ex machina* (this may be a literal description of the Shrander, by the way). Indeed, it is the Shrander, the last survivor of the K-culture, who leads Ed Chianese to grow up, to turn from his obsessive escapism and become a "seer" for humanity, and the agent for universal glorious change.

Harrison is an extraordinary writer, and *Light* is an extraordinary novel. It is a challenging and puzzling novel, at least at first, but it is always interesting. It is also almost indescribable; what passes for description above is but a small subset of a wonderful and really seamless text. If you haven't yet read any Harrison, then let it be *Light*.

Postscript: There are a number of very interesting interviews with M. John Harrison available on-line: <www.infinityplus.co.uk/nonfiction/intmjh.htm>, <www.zone-5.com/mj/harrison.html>, <www.strangehorizons.com/2003/20030609/harrison.shtml>, and <www.sfsite.com/12b/mjh142.htm>. ▶

David Mead lives in Corpus Christi, Texas.

Putting the Pieces Together Again

continued from page 1

This is not to suggest, though, that *Humpty Dumpty* pans out into a conventional autobiography. The retrospects which Wellington is allowed on his life are fragmentary. For instance, it's evident that an affair Wellington had with a woman called Jenny was central to his life. We're told on page 78 that he lived with her at a house called The Willows for nine years; on page 89 that he spent his summers in County Wicklow, Ireland, with her between 1978 and 1985; on page 245 that her last initial was S.; and on page 199 that she died at age 47—"utterly unexpected and unfair." But each of these references occurs in isolation, without other information or context. One has to put them together to get a sense of the emotional importance Jenny has for him. Making sense of Wellington's story is, therefore, a work of reconstruction—for the reader and perhaps for Wellington himself.

Echoes of other works proliferate. Most obviously, there are Lewis Carroll's Alice books. Many of Wellington's most surreal adventures, such as the encounter with the Dentists, take place underground. More than once, there are dream references to Wellington or another character growing vast and egglike; as Wellington says (91), "there's something like that in Chesterton's *The Man Who Was Thursday*"; and *The Man Who Was Thursday* is one of the few precedents for the dizzyingly unstable picaresque tone of *Humpty Dumpty*. Equally, though, there are plenty of references to the works of J.G. Ballard, the Dentists' convention suggests Avram Davidson's "Help! I am Dr. Morris Goldpepper" (1957); and when Stout, walking along a beach, comes across an astronaut buried up to his neck in the sand (216), many of readers will be reminded of Theodore Sturgeon's "The Man Who Lost the Sea" (1956). Indeed, Sturgeon's great story, with its fragmentation of the experiences that led the narrator to this terminal point, could have provided a structural model for *Humpty Dumpty*.

So, to summarize the argument so far, it seems that *Humpty Dumpty* imposes two tasks on the reader: firstly, that of reconstructing a narrative of Wellington's life up to the point of the shooting, and, secondly, attempting to sort which of his adventures after the shooting are literally true.

Certainly, not every event described in the novel can be literally true. Wellington gives some dates explicitly in his narrative. He arrives in London from Milan on Thursday October 21st, and goes to his apartment; he notes that his cranky neighbor Peabody is away. The next day, he takes a late-night flight to the United States, which arrives in Boston early on the morning of the 28th. But, late in the novel, his stepdaughter Cicely tells him (259) that he has been delusional: on October 28th he was being treated in the Peabody Clinic in New York, from which he absconded on that day. The story about flying in from London was, she says, like the story about the Dentists, a delusion caused by the bullet in his brain.

Speaking about *Humpty Dumpty* in an online chat in January 1997, Knight alluded to this issue, saying: "I notice that people who like the book are reading it about three different ways, and I think that's fine... some are reading it as sci-fi, some as fantasy, and some suspect it isn't either one... I really would rather not tell you [which it is], for fear of putting off people who read it one of the other ways." (See <showtired.wired.com/talk/club/special/transcripts/97-01-21-knight.html>.) The science-fictional reading, presumably, would be the Mongo/Space Patrol narratives are "really" true; the realistic reading would be Wellington is in hospital throughout, hallucinating; and the fantasy reading would be Wellington's extraordinary experiences are on some level taking place, but not according to any consistent natural laws.

In a moment, I'm going to stop finessing this question and present an argument for what's going on in *Humpty Dumpty*, but a diversion is an order first. A comparison that springs to mind for Knight's book, both in structure and to a certain extent in tone, is

Graham Sleight Humpty Pieces: An Ovoid Chronology

What follows is an attempt to reconstruct a chronology of Wellington Stout's life from *Humpty Dumpty*. Given the unreliability of much of the novel, it should all be taken as conjectural. In particular, there are no dates named in the text after the reference on p. 156 to October 29th. Nevertheless, if my account of time passing after that is accurate, then the novel ends (and Wellington dies) on November 4th, the saint's day of San Carlo Borromeo, in whose hospital the novel opens. Numbers in square brackets are page references; numbers in curly brackets indicate Wellington's age.

- 1925: WS's parents marry—his mother is aged 17; his elder brother Tom is born [21].
- 1935: [0] January 13, 1935: WS born in Stroudsburg, Pennsylvania [22, 266].
- 1943: [8] Tom in college [21].
- 1944: [c.9] WS reads *The Mabinogion* [86].
- 1945: [10] September: WS's father Charles drives across the USA looking for a place to live [179]. WS and his parents move to Seaview, Oregon [22].
- 1948: [13] WS's parents divorce; his mother takes WS back to Potomac [22].
- 1951: [18] WS's mother remarries to Don Fry [22].
- 1957: [22] WS in Class of '57 at university in Eugene [203].
- Early 1960s: Don Fry leaves WS's mother [22].
- 1963: [28] WS marries Myra; honeymoon in the south of France [73].
- 1974: [39] WS's affair with Glynis [101–2].
- 1976: [41] WS's ex-wife Myra (married to "dipsomaniac lawyer" Paul Fry) gives birth to daughter Cicely. [36].

- 1978–1985: WS spends his summers in County Wicklow, Ireland with Jenny [89]. Jenny later dies (in 1985?), age 47—"utterly unexpected and unfair" [199]. Her last initial was S. [245].
- Lived with Jenny at the Willows for over 9 years [78].
- 1985–88: [50–53] While Myra is in a sanatorium, WS brings up Cicely [37].
- 1993: March—Roger Wort arrives in Milan [28].
- 1999: [64] The Events of *Humpty Dumpty*
- Weds October 13: WS arrives in Milan. Meets Rosemary Sanchez on the flight over.
- Thurs October 14 (evening): WS shoe in the Flavo restaurant, Via Postumia [16].
- Friday October 15: Cicely's marriage to Roberto in Rome [18].
- Saturday October 16: WS wakes in hospital, Milan; discussions with doctor. Has now been in Milan three days, Cicely already married [15–16]. 7 pm: meeting with Roger Wort [28] (though when they leave the hospital it's afternoon [30]). WS sleeps in Grand Hotel Duomo [34].
- Sunday October 17: WS to the trade fair. Conversation with Roger Wort at 1 pm, agreement to meet at the Flavo at 7 pm [50]. At the Flavo, Roger Wort is replaced by William F. Wort—he and WS agree to meet the following morning at the Hotel Perrex [59–60].
- Monday October 18: Awakes, breakfast w/Roger [61], to the dentists' convention at the Perrex—to meet "the crows" [63]: the Forceps, the Pelican, the Elevator, Nurse Ruff [68]. Smell of smoke, "Plan B" executed [71].
- (Two days missing?)
- Thurs October 21: Morning—WS at Waterloo Station, London—

Gene Wolfe's *Peace*. There we also have a protagonist, Alden Dennis Weer, recounting a fractured autobiography. There, too, many of the facts we would like to know are obscured by the narrator's rambling and seemingly random leaps in chronology and setting. The opening line of *Peace* describes Weer being woken in his sleep by the fall of a great elm tree planted by a woman named Eleanor Boid. Only many pages later are we told that Eleanor Boid plants elms on graves, and we understand that Weer has been dead for decades, and that the tree that fell was on his own grave.

Defining the term Posthumous Fantasy in the *Encyclopedia of Fantasy*, John Clute and John Grant call it "a tale which deals with the rite of passage from death to a state of understanding"—to which one might add that the understanding may only be partial. If, as in *Peace*, the narrator fails to realize the true situation, the form's drive for closure is blocked, and none of the many stories begun in *Peace* ever ends. The gap of irony between the reader's and the narrator's understandings becomes vast and painful.

It'll be clear by now that I think the most powerful reading of *Humpy Dumpty*—the one with the greatest emotional force and with the most corroboration from the text—is that Wellington Strout is dead or dying throughout the action of the book, that the narrative constitutes a fractured resume of his life and that as hinted by the title's nursery-rhyme allusion, it's impossible to put all the pieces back together again. There are a number of hints that *Humpy Dumpty* is indeed a posthumous fantasy: at various points, Wellington is told or admits that he is already dead (185, 225); among his surreal experiences, he attends his own wake (277); and perhaps most tellingly, the restaurant in which he was shot is placed on a (real) Milanese street called via Postumia.

One problem with the posthumous fantasy as a form is the invitation it gives to sentimentality, to a weepy retrospect on a passing life—this is arguably one of the weaknesses of Dennis Porter's last drama, the science-fiction series *Cold Lazarus* (1996). Wolfe's *Peace*

shows one solution to this problem by, as I've said, building a terminal irony into the narrator's lack of perception. In *Humpy Dumpty*, Knight clearly wanted to do something different: the book, I'd argue, is a dramatization of Wellington's difficult, chaotic, but ultimately valiant and moving process of coming to terms with his life. Only a few pages into the novel, Wellington remembers (14) the white picket fences of his hometown, the hill behind them "where the black pines began to close in," and his constant sense that "something awful was waiting up there." At the other end of the book, after all his strange adventures are through, he finds himself again before "the oyster-white pales" of the picket fence (287), and begins climbing the hill willingly, even joyfully.

Another problem with the posthumous fantasy—or rather, in the case of *Peace* and *Humpy Dumpty*, what one might call the posthumous confessional—is that it tends to produce one-character novels. We'll die alone, and Wolfe's and Knight's narrators, confessing their sins at the cusp of death, have the same problem: they do not know to whom they are telling their stories. Wolfe and Knight have rather different solutions to this. In *Peace*, Wolfe concentrates on a relatively few incidents in Weer's life, describing seemingly minor happenings in great detail. The characters associated with those incidents are drawn in some detail. In Knight's book, Wellington does not meet characters from his past for any length of time, and the characters with whom he interacts most—a sinister man named Roger Wort, for example—seem to be at least part fantasy. It is perhaps this skittishness, the sense that there is little to hold on to in the book, which has been off-putting to readers.

As with Wolfe's work, again, one of the stages of understanding which readers may arrive at is that two distinct characters in *Humpy Dumpty* are in fact the same. When Wellington first speaks to Cicely (13), he notes that her voice is "like a tinkler bell"; much later, she blows him a "fairy kiss" (260). Wellington is guided through the last third of the novel by a seemingly magical young girl—much younger than Cicely—called Celia or Tinker (210). Once one understands

meeting w/Martin Gallagher [76]. To the London flat (Peabody flat opposite), meeting w/Tom [81]; drives out of London via Scotchenge [90]. Stops at the Silver Penny/Ox and Sparrow outside Barbary—once owned by Leonard and Glynis House [92]. Dream-encounter w/Glynis [93-4].
Fri October 22: Looking for Rosemary Sanchez, finds himself at Two Bears—pointer to Plymouth (MA) [97-8]. Back to London, then Heathrow [104-5] Roger Wort on the plane [107].
Sat October 23: According to Cicely, WS flees from the Peabody Clinic, New York. WS disagrees: he was on a plane on the way to New York [259]. Disaster in NYC, WS's flight diverted to Logan, Boston—arrival there 0620 [111]. Hires a talking white Buick [116]. Stays at the Eyehop, upstate NY—first strip of paper, saying LO GO GRI PHON [124]. Dream of the snow-filled future [124].
Sun October 24: Motel manager [126], encounter w/trooper [127]—WS headed to Potomac, Pennsylvania, then Plymouth PA [128]. In Potomac, meets Karen Woodland/Slater at old high school [130]. Mr. Mapleton says he never graduated from it [131]. Medication had been changed in hospital because of hallucinations [133]. Goes to old home (surrounded by never ones) and meets mother—she's younger (and alive!) and doesn't recognize him [136]. Phones Rosemary Sanchez [143-4], meets sister Lola [146], sleeps. (Dreams of Dr Peabody [149-151]; finds self in egg-shaped excavation [153]; days missing here!)
Fri October 29: Date from Fort Wayne newspaper [156]. Recounts chronology (though wrongly—misses night in Eyehop) [157]. Campfire w/ Martin Gallagher [159]. Meets Bob Fallon and Linda Joy, replaced by Dr Parravicini [162]. In Indiana; "OKRA-DOKA, SMART-ASS" [166]. Pain from the tube in his gut [166-8]. Meets Brown, Jones, Smith—war between the Spaeth People and the Mongoids [172-3].

Sat October 30: Gets Art Fleischman's Chevy—seemingly early morning [175-6]. Via Aberdeen, South Dakota to Pierre [181-2]. Willard O'Leary of the Space Patrol [183]—recaps the splot. 1 NEVER KNOW WHEN YOU'RE KIDDING [187]. Geppu and his telescope [190-2]. Motel south of Billings—visit from astronaut. Strip on toilet—URANUS IS OUT [195]. Suddenly back in London, across from Tom [196-7].
Sun October 31: Lonely [200]. Back at university [202-4]. "YOU ARE BEING" [205]. Back in Oregon hometown [206-12]. Meets Celia/Tinker [210]—age 17. Card reading [212]. Eats Tinker's brownies [218-9]. Dreams of aliens; key-lines and join-the-dots [222]. Roger Wort at Lighthouse Rock [224]. Viewing the paintings with Tinker [226-230]. Examination room with Morris Gelb—explains problem with WS's surgery [232]. Revisits the restaurant shooting [236-9]. Driving into Eugene [242]. Conversation with Tom re locator strips [251-2]. Driving back to Boston [255]. Conversation with Cicely in Hotel Deluxe, Farmington [257-9]. WS refuses her offer of flight back to NY, she blows him a "fairy kiss" [260]. Dreams of sinking to center of the earth [261].
Mon November 1: On a bus; encounter with frogs [261-6]. First go at decoding the paper strips [268]. Encounters Mr. Mapleton [271-2]—"transition between domains." Flies back to England, takes three days—so arrives on 4th November?
Thurs November 4: Feast-day of San Carlo Borromeo. Past Sylvia Phlox's block of flats and to London home [273]. Figures out code and pulls Gallagher from his cuff [275-6]. Party outside—Glynis is there [277]. Tinker takes him to Milan—flying again. At the tomb of San Carlo Borromeo [282]. To the roof of the Duomo [285]. Up the hill past the picket fence [287—revisiting the setting seen at 14].

that Tinker is an avatar of Cicely, that she represents many of the feelings of hope Wellington has invested in her, one's reading of the book is significantly enriched. For instance, the late scene mentioned above where Cicely tells Wellington about his disappearance from the Peabody Clinic, and attempts to persuade him back, becomes far more moving as a result. Nonetheless, Tinker—with all her echoes of *Peter Pan*—is the most dangerously sentimental device in *Humpty Dumpty*. I think Knight gets away with it, but by the skin of his teeth.

Once one has come to see Tinker's central role in the book as guide, stage-manager, and representative of innocence, many other things fall into place. For instance, on several occasions the mysterious astronauts are referred to as the "Space Patrol," which made me wonder if someone in the storytelling chain would say "Space Patrol" that way. And, sure enough, on Wellington's first meeting with Tinker, he notes that she has a slight lisp (208). So Wellington, a man who says (181) that he is suspicious of people who are alone, is guided to the final aloneness of death by a spirit or guide who seems to be telling much of the story with him. Yet she is a polar opposite of Wellington in many ways, not least in her youth.

The issue of how one depicts youth is another structural problem of the posthumous confessional. One might say that such books are, by definition, entirely made up of flashbacks. A problem for the writer, therefore, is how to maintain a consistent enough tone while slipping from the narrator's frame story in old age to incidents earlier in their life. Knight's handling of this is one of the great strengths of *Humpty Dumpty*. One never doubts that the Wellington telling the story is a man in his sixties, set in his routines, and seeing life's possibilities beginning to narrow down. At the same time, the precision and detail of his memories are such that one can perceive clearly the young man he was, and how the one became the other.

Wellington also has a quality which peculiarly suits his journey: a kind of patience and stoicism in the face of the extraordinary events which he undergoes. Even towards the end of the book, when he perceives his body becoming partly mechanical, infested with tubes and wires, he does not complain but simply continues on his path. It's this, perhaps, which prevents him from asking too insistently the question of what is real and what hallucinated in his narrative.

I think, in the end, that there's not enough evidence in the novel to come to a conclusion about how much of Wellington's story is "really real." Moreover, I think this is a conscious aesthetic choice on Knight's part. It's a dramatization, or an enactment, of a fact that is difficult for anyone to be at peace with—that we will all die with wounds unsaid, business unfinished, events not fully understood. Wellington's great achievement is to be able, by the book's conclusion, to be at a kind of peace even though, like the reader, he doesn't have all the answers he wants.

There is a great deal in *Humpty Dumpty* which I've not been able to touch on. It is both an extremely funny and extremely poignant book. It's packed with puns and wordplay, of which the title is only the most obvious example. I'm sure that many of the character and place names can be mined for significance, as can (for instance) the titles of a series of strange paintings which Wellington views with Tinker (226-228). Through all its surreal byways, there is a rigorous sense of reality and chronology underpinning it. Despite its similarities with other posthumous fantasies, it's far more open work than one might expect and is very much unlike *Pan's* in that respect. In the end, it's one of a kind—like Wellington Stout, or like any of us.

There are two final things to say. The first is about judgment. The posthumous fantasy form, I think, invites its readers to come to a conclusion about the narrator, to pass a judgment on the life we've seen spread out before us. We may come to believe that, for instance, Weir in *Pan's* is genuinely and deservedly in an interminable and self-created hell, just as we may believe that Rush Who Speaks in John Crowley's *Engine Summer* (1979) is deservedly called a "saint." In what I've said above, I've consciously avoided making moral judgments about Wellington. That's not because I don't have views on the subject. There are some things about Wellington I'm uncomfortable with, just as there are some things about him that are deeply lovely. But I think it's for each reader to form their own view of him.

The second thing is this: although *Humpty Dumpty* was Damon Knight's last novel, it wasn't his last piece of fiction. Unless something

else is dug from his archives, his last piece of fiction is "Watching Matthew," from the October/November 2002 *F&SF*. It, too, is a surreal posthumous fantasy: in it, a dead twin watches his brother going through his life. At its close, the surviving brother—addressed by the dead twin in the second person—sees his long-dead father again. The father grows balloon-like and monstrous, and the final paragraph has something of the achieved peace which *Humpty Dumpty* also creates:

You notice that [your father] is coming slowly nearer without moving. His head and body are growing larger and at the same time sinking onto the ground like an elevator. "*Tempus edax rerum*," he says. Time devours all things. Now he's just a head, but it is like Humpty Dumpty's, taller than you are, and as it moves towards you the mouth opens into a cavern and you're falling at last into the leaf-mold darkness where I live.

Here we are. Welcome home, brother. (240)

Postscript

While tracking down my copy of *Humpty Dumpty*, I came across its listing on amazon.com. The customer-written reviews were mixed, either awarding it the maximum five stars or one/two. In response, another review followed, apparently from the author. I reproduce it in full below:

The parts have a sum., November 23, 1998

Reviewer: Damon Knight from Eugene, OR

After mulling it over, I think I can see that the reviewers who complained that *Humpty Dumpty* was less than the sum of its parts just didn't see the point and thought there wasn't any. (It happens.)

Humpty is a puzzle wrapped in a mystery, and it wouldn't be any fun if I just told you the answer, but I will tell you where to look for clues.

P. 185, next to last paragraph.

P. 186, last paragraph in italics, second sentence.

P. 197, next to last paragraph, first sentence.

P. 225, ninth paragraph (after "What do you mean, Roger?")

As an added bonus, the first words of these sentences read in inverse order (last first) will answer the question, "Who says all this is true?" :)

Damon

The relevant paragraphs are:

P. 185: "Yes. I am already dead."

P. 196: A frog ought to speak less and croak more.

P. 197: So many curious things had been happening to me since I left England that I was sure only a few of them could be true, but the puzzle was to find out which.

P. 225: "I mean I read. So are you, or as good as, but I'm six feet down. How do you think that feels?"

This would be helpful corroboration for my assertion that Wellington is dead throughout—especially given that *crank* is English slang for die. However, the "first words" hint from Knight gives the nonsensical "How is so a I yes" . . . On the other hand, the first letter of each extract read backwards gives "ISAY" or "I say." ▀

This essay is based on a paper which I delivered at the International Conference in the Fantastic in the Arts in March 2004. I'm grateful to the other session participants, especially John Kessel, for their insights.

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Gleanings: Narrative Voice and Two Stories by Steele

Narrative voice arises, in part, from the writer's choice of sentence structures. Writers tend to have their own personal and particular ways of approaching sentences. I know this is true of me. I have my ideas of formal structure in a sentence, and while these ideas may be shared with many other writers, I apply my writing tools to these ideas in what is probably an idiosyncratic way. I suspect this holds true for other writers, as well.

If it is true, at any rate, that narrative voice arises from the writer's choice of sentence structures and if it is also true that writers tend to have distinct, personal ways of approaching the sentences they are writing, then this would seem to follow: that if a writer has found her or his "voice"—with "finding one's voice" referring to the sense we have of a writer's reaching a marked level of maturity—then that writer is to some degree limited by that finding of voice.

To some degree, a writer's sense of her- or himself limits the range that writer can achieve in displaying narrative voice.

The potential good in this lies in the hope the writer may produce less of the shilly-shallying frippery of the youthful writer with a shaky sense of her or his own center.

The potential bad lies in the fear the writer may stumble when attempting narrative voices that require different kinds of sentences than the ones that best suit the writer's own voice.

The highly effective narrative voice of Allen M. Steele's "Moreau" (*Analogy*, July/August 2004) arises in part because the character of the writing and the character of the story match so well.

The following paragraph, from the first scene in the story, gives a good example of this voice:

So off he went across the sea of Tranquility, trying to avoid the larger rocks in his way as he dragged Mariano behind him. One-sixth gravity helped a little bit, but not much; the stretcher prohibited him from making bunny-hops, and after awhile it didn't seem as if there was any real difference. At first he maintained radio silence, for fear that any transmissions might bring another missile down upon him, until he realized that the radio was his only real hope of being rescued before his air supply was used up. So he switched it back on and toggled to the emergency band. No one responded to his calls for help, though, and soon he was singing "Little Red Rooster" over and over, just to keep himself company. It was the only song he could remember offhand, but his father had sung it with his platoon during Gulf War II, and just now it seemed appropriate.

The story follows a reporter named Phil Carson, who is hoping to get frontline news about a war newly taking place on the Moon, who survives a crash and is rescued by a doctor engaged in unusual genetic experiments, and who then finds himself put in a dire situation by that doctor. The settings include the interior of an orbital habitat, the surface of the Moon, and the doctor's research facility. Other characters include veteran news photographer George Mariano and a handful of children who bear genes altered from the human norm. The literary nod goes to Wells's *The Island of Dr. Moreau*, not only in the title but within the story itself: character Dr. Laurent Marquand calls himself Moreau for a time, a quirk that moves Carson to start reading the Wells original. The story's motifs include those of parental responsibility to children, dedicated occupational duty, the mating of man and machine, the appearance of children who are like aliens, and the tyrannical impulse to maintain a controlling hand upon the future.

In the story, Steele takes the rhetorical task of following speech patterns and speech logic. Take a sentence such as this one: "The back of his head smacked the inside of his helmet, and that was the last thing he felt for a good long while." This is not a picture of grammatical clarity, being set up with two subjects when one would work as well, or better—from a purely grammatical point of view. Nor is it a picture of semantic clarity, with the phrase "a good long while" more like a rolling-post of reassuringly familiar sounds than an apt, concise expression to communicate what is being said. Yet the

sentence moves the way speech does, and it expresses the situation the way a person would in casual conversation. As a rhetorical task, it is extremely effective, partly because it is reassuring to be spoken to in this way, and partly because the narrative voice sounds much like the voice we would expect reporter Phil Carson to use, as narrator—which he is not. The voice has the tone of a seasoned, knowledgeable, levelheaded person willing to take the ups and downs of life in steady stride; and Carson shows himself to be a seasoned, knowledgeable, levelheaded person who clearly takes his ups and downs in stride. He is the reigning adult in the story, with the supposedly veteran newsgatherer Mariano acting like an impulsive reportorial greenhorn in comparison. Even Dr. Marquand, with his vacillations between reasoning compassion and arrogant coldheartedness, appears as Carson's junior. The contrast between the characters stands out starkly, in part, because of the nature of the narrative voice.

That this seasoned and sensible voice is partly Steele's seems a reasonable assumption. Many of the same characteristics appear in the narrative voice of a distinctively different, recent story by him, the novella "Shady Grove" (*Analogy*, July 2004). In this case, the main character Wendy Gunther is also the narrator. This is punnively Wendy's narrative voice, at the same time that it is Steele's. While far from being an unsuccessful use of narrative voice, its use succeeds at a lower level than does the equivalent in "Moreau."

The story of "Shady Grove" is difficult to render in capsule form, since it is a series of episodes that are part of a larger story involving a world named Coyote. It does share some motifs with "Moreau," however, that I think are worth mentioning: the sense of parental responsibility to children, the appearance of alien creatures who are childlike, and a high-minded man with tyrannical impulses. Again, too, a war is taking place.

My main curiosity for the moment, however, lies with the narrative voice being used. The following paragraph, taken from a point near the end of the story, gives an example of this voice:

So intent were we upon following the tracks, that we didn't look up to notice that the mountainside had changed until I raised my eyes and saw a massive bluff looming before us. At first I thought it was another limestone formation, like those prevalent throughout Midland, but as we came closer, I saw that it was a dark grey rock. Much later, talking it over with Fred LaRoche, I'd learn that this was ignimbrite, volcanic ashes left behind by ancient eruptions that had been compacted over time to form a substance much like concrete. Sometimes called tuff, it had often been used on Earth as construction material. In parts of China, houses were built of bricks carved from ignimbrite quarries, but in northern Italy the opposite approach had been taken, with homes and shops being excavated within tuff deposits.

(Since this is a science fiction story I am talking about, I cannot resist quibbling that "limestone formation" and "dark grey rock" are not necessarily mutually exclusive.)

It may not be exactly the voice that fit Phil Carson's story so well. At the same time, it is not exactly a different one. What is striking, moreover, is that the casual, conversational wording and the knowledgeable tone of this passage are given an unusual emphasis, due to their placement: for this paragraph appears in the middle of a chase scene, in which Wendy Gunther is trying to catch up with beings who abducted her daughter.

What I am suggesting is that elements of viewpoint find their way into the story, via the narrative voice, that are not perfect fits with the apparent character of Gunther. She has the same underlying motivation that Dr. Marquand has, in the tale set on the Moon. Both see themselves as defending their children. Somehow, however, I find myself more surprised by her actions than I am by his. That I was slightly jarred says a great deal.

Giving a character the narrative voice sets up the expectation that

the elements of that voice are also those of the character. In this specific case, the reader expects the narrator of "Shady Grove" to be the same Wendy Gunther as the character bearing that name.

The actual situation here, however, seems to be that on the one hand there is a narrative voice that identifies itself as being Wendy Gunther's. On the other hand, there is a separate character within the narrative itself, who is named Wendy Gunther. Wendy Gunther, the character, emerges as a separate entity from Wendy Gunther, the voice.

How much of a problem does this present the reader? In practical terms, almost none, for the narrator comes across as a reliable one, and

as one strong enough to carry the reader through to the end. The narrator gives a successful telling of the story.

What does "successful telling" mean here, however? It seems to mean that the narrator overpowers the character. While some critics might see this as creating a situation worth exploring in feminist terms, I see it, perhaps more simply, as one explanation for why "Moreau" gives deeper satisfaction, some blyssness, than does "Shady Grove," even though the latter is a longer and perhaps more ambitious work. ►

Mark Kesh lives in Stevens Point, Wisconsin.

Forty Signs of Rain by Kim Stanley Robinson

New York: Bantam, 2004; \$25.00 hc; 368 pages

reviewed by Paul Kincaid

James Lovelock, the creator of the Gaia hypothesis, has declared that global warming is now so far out of control that the environmental movement must accept a massive expansion in nuclear energy if we are to reduce CO₂ emissions sufficiently to make any difference. At the same time, photographs are published showing the torrential rivers of meltwater from what was the Greenland icecap. George W. Bush still refuses to accept the climate control regulations agreed to at Kyoto; there are signs that Vladimir Putin will finally sign the Kyoto agreement. This is, if you will pardon the expression, a hot potato in terms of science, politics, and our collective futures. Nevertheless, although science fiction writers have been more than happy to set their stories in the aftereffects of global warming—Los Angeles reduced to a tropical forest, vast swathes of the United Kingdom under water—few have dared to confront the issue head-on.

If any science fiction writer was going to do so, of course, it was bound to be Kim Stanley Robinson. Fresh from terraforming Mars (and incidentally rewriting global history), he is used to taking the long view, the patient accumulation of small effects, that such a subject requires. So it is no real surprise that *Forty Signs of Rain* should be the first part of a new trilogy devoted to just this issue.

However, although we can applaud his acute liberal instincts (instincts which are always in plain view throughout everything he writes), we should be far more hesitant about welcoming what he has done with those instincts. *Forty Signs of Rain* is, of course, beautifully written, and there are some wonderful set pieces, but you've reached page 300 of this 368-page novel before you get the first clues that there might actually be a story going on in this book. There is a great deal of setting the scene, and I suspect the next two volumes could be highly dramatic, but Robinson could have set the scene far more succinctly and allowed room for something to actually happen in the first two-thirds of this novel.

Anyone who read *Blue Mars* or the latter parts of *The Years of Rice and Salt* will recognize in Robinson a fondness for committees and debates, long arguments in which characters of impeccable liberal sensibilities discuss the exact consequences of their actions—often at the expense of actually acting. Robinson can produce multilayered arguments more convincingly than any other writer of fiction I know, and the intellectual exercise of these passages can be invigorating as we confront and challenge our own dearly held prejudices. Unfortunately, they can also get in the way of story, as if Robinson has been temporarily seduced into producing a thick piece rather than a work of fiction. He gets away with it in part because he writes so well, in part because we are pleased to see anyone putting forward our own liberal perspectives on things as if they might actually work, and in part because he surrounds the debates with grand vistas of space or time that take our breath away. Alas, in *Forty Signs of Rain* the vistas are absent until the last sixty or seventy pages, and it is an act of faith to keep reading on through debate after debate with little clue that there might be any real-world effect from all their discussions. You wonder, often, how much the cause of global warming is helped by this much hot air.

One character, Frank Vanderwall, argues with himself so obsessively and applies scattergun anthropological theories to all he sees with such abandon that he is an entire Robinsonian debating society in himself. Frank is that archetypal Robinson hero, a

Californian rock climber and surfer dude who also happens to be a top scientist, coming to the end of a year in Washington at the National Science Foundation where he's involved in assessing research funding applications. This is the scientist as committee creature, though most of the characters in the novel are scientists, we see remarkably little real science), and one strand of the story involves Frank attending a lecture on the Buddhist approach to science, having a vaguely erotic encounter with a stranger, and proposing a radical rethink of the way the NSF works, which eventually results in him staying on in the unconventional environment of Washington for another year. This is the strand that involves our most action-oriented hero.

Frank's colleague, Anna Quibler (a surname seemingly chosen only to allow a weak and obvious pun at one point), befriends a bunch of exiled Tibetans who are now forming an embassy for a tiny island realm in the mouth of the Ganges that is now threatened by rising sea levels. Towards the end of the novel there is an indirect suggestion that they may be seeking a new incarnation of the Buddha as well as help for their drowning home; but for most of the book their job is simply to provide the lecture that affects Frank, and to be wise, calm and reasonable in every circumstance.

Anne's husband, Charlie, meanwhile, is advising a senator on the introduction of new environmental legislation. However, Charlie works from home to look after their infant son, Joe, and far more pages are devoted to the joys of feeding a baby or playing with it or having it suck on your neck than there are devoted to the political realities of Charlie's job. Even when Charlie has a meeting with a George Bush-like President and his Dr. Strangelove-type scientific advisor (the closest Robinson can bring himself to creating a villain) our focus is more upon the baby sleeping on Charlie's back than it is upon the potentially vital debate that is taking place. And when political opposition leads the senator to drop the most important provisions of Charlie's bill, a bit of political wheeler-dealing that would have made for a gripping episode of *The West Wing*, it barely disturbs the placid surface of Charlie's care for Joe.

All of this is the calm before the storm, and it is surely intentional, this long, hot summer barely raising a flicker of emotion before the heavens open. But it's a risky strategy, and long stretches of this serene inertia are simply dreary. Then a wild storm starts to eat away at the cliffs along California's coast, and unprecedented rain floods Washington so dramatically that even the Lincoln Memorial has its feet dappled in the turbid water. This is climate change of a startling ferocity, the language of the first 300 pages abruptly replaced by turbulence and drama. This is really terrific writing, as chains of volunteers battle against lashing rain to save California's crumbling coastline, and Washington D.C. is transformed into a vast and unlikely lake. It makes you recognize how good this whole novel could have been had some of the physical and human consequences of climate change been signalled earlier. But this first volume, in the end, fails. It fails because Robinson allows his discursiveness, his scene setting, and his sentimentality to get between him and the story he wants to tell. It's a wonderful story, a major and vitally important topic, but it looks as if we are going to have to wait until the second volume for him start telling this story as it needs to be told. ►

Paul Kincaid lives in Folkestone, Kent, England.

Jeremy Adam Smith
The Ten Best Science Fiction Film Directors

What makes a science fiction film good?

If you ask Hollywood, the answer appears to be laughable plotting, trite characterization, and violent spectacle, as exemplified by movies such as *The Thing From Another World* (1951), *Colossus: The Forbin Project* (1970), and *Independence Day* (1996). In such films, reason sleeps. From them, monsters are born: hatred and distrust of intellectuals, especially scientists; xenophobia; and rejection of technology as inhuman. At best, such films dramatize our fears about science and technology; at worst, they promote the spread of those fears.

That they never get the science right is almost beside the point: science fiction in any medium succeeds by tapping the power of myth to explore the relationship between human beings and technology. By their nature, scientific "laws" are subject to revision—from Newton to Einstein to Hawking—and technology never stands still. Science fiction faithful to the science of its day (such as Verne's or Asimov's) becomes obsolete once the first spaceship lands on the moon or the genome is mapped.

The best science fiction films endure by transcending the limitations of present-day knowledge. They look beyond contemporary trends to the big questions of how science and technology shape the human spirit, and vice versa: How does scientific discovery change our conception of our place in the universe? How do we cope with the ethical dilemmas technology creates? How does technology mediate and change our most intimate, interpersonal relationships?

These and other questions will not change, even as our tools, knowledge, and answers evolve. As creative works, science fiction films last only by embracing what Faulkner called, "the old ventricles and truths of the heart . . . love and honor and pity and pride and compassion and sacrifice." Ideas are never enough; the best science fiction films also contain complex characters, thoroughly imagined situations and settings, and well-constructed narratives—not to mention a distinctive voice and sense of style.

Putting all these elements together is the director's responsibility, and certain directors, whether inside or outside of Hollywood, consistently make the best science fiction films. While nearly all of my ten best directors are accomplished craftsmen (and yes, unfortunately, they are all men), what most distinguishes each of them from their contemporaries is a vision that fuses all the disparate elements of filmmaking into whole new worlds. The absence of vision is why empty spectacles such as *Armageddon* (1998) or *The Core* (2003) utterly fail as science fiction.

Note that what follows is my list of the ten best science fiction directors, not the ten best science fiction films. My "best films" list would include works by directors who made only one great science fiction film, such as Robert Wise's *The Day the Earth Stood Still* (1951) or Philip Kaufman's remake of *Journeys of the Body Snatchers* (1978). Conversely, it would exclude those visionary directors, such as David Cronenberg, who have not yet made one film that stands out as a masterpiece. I'm mindful, by the way, of how pale and male this list is. While there have been many interesting efforts by female directors—such as Kathryn Bigelow's *Strange Days* (1995) or Lynn Hershman Leeson's *Teknolust* (2002)—none have a body of work that can be ranked among the best. There are simply too few women, or people of color, making science fiction films. This is a problem with the genre, and not with those people who can't identify with it. Hopefully, science fiction will continue to evolve beyond its original demographics.

Any ranking system is necessarily going to be arbitrary, so I've ranked the directors in order of my personal preference. If you disagree with my rankings—and you probably will—then I invite your letters!

I. Stanley Kubrick

I first saw *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968) when I was ten years old, in a glorious old theater in Saginaw, Michigan. The movie's images have stayed with me all the life: the apex cowering at the foot of the black monolith, and then drawing near, tentatively touching its surface; the shuttle docking to the strains of "Blue Danube," its cabin subjectively still while all the universe turns around it; the slow death

of HAL; the *Discovery* in orbit around Jupiter; and so on. *2001* is filled with long silences and breathtaking visuals, fearlessly sublime. Kubrick never fails to trust his audience, and his conviction is backed up by flawless special effects and art direction. Even today, Kubrick's depiction of space travel is completely convincing, containing as much simple truth as *Star Wars* contains spectacular lies.

Kubrick is often criticized for being deaf and blind to the comedy of human variety—an accusation with which I agree. It has frozen the heart of many of his films, but not *2001*. Though the crew members of the *Discovery* are emotionally remote, it is part of Kubrick's method that we never care what ultimately happens to *2001*'s human characters; any individual is, in Kubrick's vision, less than a blink of the eye, one minuscule part of a vast universe.

The content of the characters' sparse dialogue in *2001* is irrelevant, their words functioning as tiny descriptive touches. Only HAL's voice, warm and haunting, carries any weight, forming the emotional core of the film. Despite the many deaths in *2001*, I was not moved to pity until HAL begs for his life. This inversion of man and machine is paralleled by Kubrick's choice not to reveal the makers of the monolith that inspires humanity's evolutionary advance. *2001* is about endless yearning, the constant striving to become more than what we are, for which HAL and the monolith are symbols. Technology—embodied by HAL—emerges not as the antithesis to the human, but instead as its reflection.

In *A Clockwork Orange* (1971), Kubrick explores technology as an instrument of social control, as well as a metaphor for the inescapable forces that make free choice a puzzle whose pieces never seem to fit. When I first saw this film as a teenager, I naturally started by identifying with the angry, nerdy nihilism of its antihero Alex, and his fierce, exuberant will to power. Today I see the film differently; in my adult eyes, Alex looks like a lost, vicious, pathetic, betrayed figure—the apparent freedom he finds at the story's climax is a cruel deception. Though *A Clockwork Orange* is often interpreted as "a statement about the freedom of choice" (to quote *The Mammoth Encyclopedia of Science Fiction*), my own view is that Kubrick doesn't believe such a thing is possible. The film's grimness derives not so much from its shabby housing estates, or its portrayal of behavior modification, as from Alex's being trapped within himself. This is the root of *A Clockwork Orange*'s irony—Alex is still a slave to social forces and desires every bit as dehumanizing as the aversion therapy he undergoes. At the end of *A Clockwork Orange*, the question remains open: under such conditions, what is the right way to live? Alex doesn't have the answer. (Tarkovsky's *Solaris*, discussed below, does venture a humanistic answer to this question, one I think Kubrick would embrace.)

Finally, there is Kubrick's great satire *Dr. Strangelove or, How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb* (1964). This film is filled with truly incredible comic performances—George C. Scott is hilariously over the top as General Buck Turgidson, and Peter Sellers acts all three of his roles—but its real triumph is its disciplined tone, which strikes a perfect balance between insanity and banality. Sam Pickens plays the heroic Major T. J. "King" Kong straight—and I couldn't help but cheer Kong and his crew as they valiantly obstruct after obstruct to drop their nuclear bombs over some luckless Russian city. This, notes J. G. Ballard, is "Kubrick's masterstroke." By making us identify with the crew, we are "enlisted on the side of our darkest fears," exposing "all the sinister glamour and unconscious logic of technological death." In the end, we all get what we want, an outcome that dooms the planet.

I rank Kubrick as the best science fiction film director in part because of his technical mastery; if only all science fiction directors had his eye for detail, and his skill in making the details contribute to a complete vision of the future. But there is much more to Kubrick—he puts film technology to the task of answering those big questions that only science fiction can answer. "The most terrifying fact about the universe," said Kubrick in 1968, "is not that it is hostile but that it is indifferent . . . if we come to terms with this indifference and accept the challenges of life within the boundaries of death—however

mutable man may be able to make them—our existence as a species can have genuine meaning and fulfillment. However vast the darkness, we must supply our own light."

2. David Cronenberg

No one else makes movies like David Cronenberg's. Films like *Scanners* (1981), *Videodrome* (1983), *The Fly* (1986), and *eXistenZ* (1999) are instantly recognizable for their wintry soundtracks and anonymous cityscapes, which manage to appear simultaneously seedy and clean. Cronenberg is Canadian, and anyone acquainted with Canada's most modern cities will know the source of his tone and iconography. His is a uniquely personal vision, rare in such a collaborative medium.

Virtually all of Cronenberg's films are about the convergence of human and machine—in each of them, even his non-*sf* films, technology grows more organic while flesh becomes more technological. In *Videodrome*, a pornographer steps into the television image, learning to embrace the video apocalypse as a higher stage of human evolution. The virtual reality game pods in *eXistenZ*, which updates *Videodrome*'s themes, pulse and bleed like small animals. In *Scanners*, the protagonist merges his nervous system with that of a computer, with explosive and transcendent results.

Many of the best science fiction films are based in literature (as with Kubrick's classic films, for example), but with the exceptions of the supernatural thriller *The Dead Zone* (1983, based on Stephen King's novel) and possibly *Naked Lunch* (1991), Cronenberg's most effective work is drawn entirely for his own lewd, cinematic imagination. His is a fearless, manic originality, which is not afraid to appear ridiculous.

It's tempting, for example, to see the flawed *eXistenZ* as warmed-over Philip K. Dick, or as a pale shadow of the incandescent *The Matrix* (1999). To be sure, *eXistenZ* can be boring and embarrassingly solemn. But unlike Hollywood adaptations of Dick—such as the execrable *Total Recall* (1990) or *Psychic* (2003)—Cronenberg takes Dick's themes into unfamiliar aesthetic territory. His virtual reality is not wish fulfillment, with the cool weaponry and leather longcoats of *The Matrix*, but an uncomfortably vivid confrontation with the blood, shit, and mucus of the human body. Cronenberg's is a distinctly anti-epic, antierotic vision, unrelentingly hostile to glitter and glamour. Few artists are willing to go as far as Cronenberg in depicting the intimate relationship between technology and biology. While the results are often horrific to watch, beyond the horror there is a moral affirmation of the human in the machine.

Cronenberg's early films are marred by low-budget amateurishness, but throughout the '80s and '90s, Cronenberg steadily improved his craft and hired better actors. Like William S. Burroughs (whose "unfilmable" book *Naked Lunch* was filmed by Cronenberg in 1991) and J. G. Ballard (whose *Crash* was adapted by Cronenberg in 1996), Cronenberg creates characters shaped primarily by the roles they play—especially in his early films, their personal histories and motivations are obscure and irrelevant, a method that alienates audiences and limits the effectiveness of his stories. Even in his more recent character studies, there is a whiff of authorial manipulation. Though he lacks Kubrick's technical mastery and shares his coldness, of the two Cronenberg is the more metaphorical and original filmmaker—no one film stands out (yet) as a masterpiece, but his is the most interesting body of work on this list.

3. Steven Spielberg

Spielberg is as sentimental as Cronenberg and Kubrick are pitiless, a director whose films are littered with cute children and tearjerking finales, and whose most recent science fiction films have been overly slick and money-bloated. But he is also one of the few Hollywood filmmakers willing to ask how technology changes our relationships with ourselves, and each other.

Close Encounters of the Third Kind (1977) is his most important science fiction film, marking a post-Vietnam maturation in the way mainstream America was willing to encounter alien cultures. Instead of lashing out—as do the heroes of so many alien-invasion movies—Spielberg's protagonists pursue the alien as a pathway to higher self-consciousness. Spielberg is more adept than any other science fiction director in creating characters, particularly children, who matter,

sketching their motivations and complexities with unmatched economy and sensitivity. The family scenes with Richard Dreyfuss and Teri Garr are the heart of *Close Encounters*, and the reason why we understand what's at stake when the UFOs appear in the sky; they represent a technology-driven collision of cultures, a fissure between worlds in which anything can happen. *Close Encounters* tries to heal such wounds, and to imagine an ethical system that will allow us to live together in a world that becomes more like a village every day.

In *E.T.: The Extra-Terrestrial* (1982), Spielberg refines this method and narrows it to a child's gaze. I was twelve when I first saw this film, and I watched it at least seven times in the theater. As an adult I find much to criticize—sentimentality and wishful thinking, for example—but I have to admit that there is something at the center of *E.T.* where it all comes together. This is not only the result of Spielberg's sense of fun, and of his skillful manipulation of his audience's sympathies, but also of his insight into how adults can damage children, even with the best of intentions. Of course, in the end Spielberg must pull back from the abyss: the families reunite, the rift is closed, the end.

As a science fiction director, Spielberg knows how to induce a sense of wonder in his audience, while clearly understanding that his futures will seem utterly banal to the characters who must live in them. In the flawed *A. I.* (2001), discarded "mechas"—miracles of humanoid machination—are ripped apart in a kind of televised monster-truck rally. Thus the promises of tomorrow become yesterday's junk. (In *A. I.*, Spielberg once again pulls back from the abyss. Had the film been made by Kubrick, as originally intended, it might have ended with David trapped on the ocean floor, instead of reunited in a far-future afterlife with his "mother.") In *Minority Report* (2002), a crowd steps off an elevator into a retail reader. Their eyes blink steel-blue as they're read and identified; as they walk through a mall, holographic advertisements call to them by name while at the same time they're tracked by the precognitive supercops who keep the city murder-free. The scene is both magical and chilling.

In the worlds of *Minority Report* and *A. I.*, privacy and freedom are things that must be purchased, but most people apparently don't see the need. No matter what wonders, horrors, or boredom may await us in the future, we can get used to anything.

4. Andrei Tarkovsky

Though *Solaris* (1972), *Stalker* (1979), and *The Sacrifice* (1986) are all remarkably slow-paced—there are stretches of *Stalker* that will try the patience of even the most dedicated cinephile—they are among the most unusual and thematically daring films in science fiction. Of the many films mentioned in this list that explore the nature of memory, *Solaris* is the darkest and deepest. Based on the novel by the Stanislaw Lem, *Solaris* presents a planetary living ocean that turns the guiltiest memories of the poor humans studying it into living flesh. When I re-watched *Solaris* recently, I was most struck by Tarkovsky's detailed, sensitive attention to character and landscape, which merge into a seamless whole; for example, when we first see the psychologist Kelvin walking in the country, the sun-dappled water perfectly reflects the melancholy in his eyes.

Solaris poses a series of complex ethical challenges to science and technology, indivisible from individual choice. When Kelvin tells the troubled cosmonaut Burton that human morality cannot be imposed on science, Burton retorts, "Knowledge is only valid when it rests on a foundation of morality." Kelvin, we learn, drove his wife Hari to suicide ten years before. At Solaris Station, Kelvin finds two raving scientists and a reincarnated Hari. At first, like the two scientists, he rejects and tries to kill his "visitor." In the end, he embraces her and takes responsibility for her existence. "In these inhuman conditions he alone acted human," says Hari to the scientists, "while you two pretend it doesn't concern you, and that your visitors are just an exterior enemy. But your visitors are part of you, they are your conscience." Like Hari, Kelvin—"a copy from a matrix"—becomes the most human of all the characters. Unlike Kubrick's monolith, which addresses itself to the whole of humanity, Tarkovsky's ocean stands as a challenge to every individual human life. Know thyself.

At the beginning the allegorical *Stalker*, three men gather in a bar, filmed in the sumptuous black and white of Dorothy's Kansas. There

are no names, for they are symbols, not individual characters: Writer (heart/id/Scarecrow); Professor (brain/ego/Tin Woodsman); and Stalker (spirit/superego/Dorothy and Lion combined). They travel to a wild and natural region, dubbed "the Zone," that has been taken over by an unknown alien force. In the Zone the film bursts into the glorious color of Oz, a place where magical things happen and "wishes come true." As they journey closer to the heart of the Zone (that is, the Emerald City), Stalker adopts a little dog and the viewer comes to suspect that the Zone is nothing more than a mass hallucination. The curtain is ripped away, and in the end they must look within themselves for miracles. Back in "Kansas," Stalker faces a crisis of faith. If no one believes in the Zone, then can it exist? And if it does not exist, then what purpose in life does he have? Tarkovsky's unambiguous answer is that the Zone does exist—personified in Stalker's mutant child, whom he ignores—though we often spend our lives running away from its mysteries and burdens. Like Kelvin, Stalker must find the courage to embrace his life and those in it.

In Tarkovsky's beautiful, mystifying final film, *The Sacrifice*, a writer's family gathers to celebrate his seventieth birthday. When a nuclear attack is announced on the radio, they begin a slow slide into emotional entropy. To save them—and, incidentally, the world—the writer renounces all that he holds dear: his home, his family, and his talent—in the hope that God might revoke World War III. The film's ambiguity arises from meaning of the sacrifice: is it self-deception, a retreat into superstition, or the writer's most ennobling act? In the hands of a filmmaker as subtle and skilled as Tarkovsky, the answer might be all three.

5. Terry Gilliam

Brasil (1985) begins as an ingenious summation of the great dystopias of the twentieth century, most notably Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (which, in *Brasil*'s DVD commentary, Gilliam claims not to have read) and Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451*. Then, shockingly, Gilliam takes dystopia into the twenty-first century by satirizing its victims. *Brasil* is rife with high irony and savage parody, most of it directed at the fantasy life of the bureaucrat protagonist, Sam Lowry, brilliantly played by Jonathan Pryce. Fantasy is Sam's only defense against the police state he serves, as well as an escape from the moral contradictions of his life. When he finally rebels, the rebellion is deformed, and ultimately sabotaged (in a denouement that inverts *A Clockwork Orange*'s ending) by his daydreams. With its magnificent art design—the ducts, in particular, are a brilliant symbol for the

irrational roots of much quotidian technology—*Brasil* is simultaneously dream and nightmare. *Brasil* is also funny, heartbreaking, and in places almost too horrifying to watch.

Gilliam's great theme is the role of fantasy in daily life. *Time Bandits* (1981) is a fabulous romp through history that, in Spielberg's hands, would have become a child's daydream. Gilliam fashions it into something menacing—the final image, when the child-hero's parents vanish and he is left standing alone, taps into the primal childhood fear of abandonment. Gilliam's other explicitly science fiction film, *12 Monkeys* (1995), is creatively art-designed and contains at least one fantastic performance (by Brad Pitt, of all people), but still pales beside its source, Chris Marker's "La Jetée" (discussed below). Like *Time Bandits*, *12 Monkeys* is a story about a damaged child, cast alone into a cold and desolate world. Though a limited actor, Bruce Willis is well cast for the little-boy hurt that never leaves his eyes.

I'm not sure why *12 Monkeys* ultimately doesn't work for me. Perhaps it fails because it never moves beyond that hurt to something larger; it lacks the moral gravity of, say, *Salvador*, or even *Close Encounters*—or *Brasil*, for that matter. *Brasil* remains one of the great speculative films. I doubt that any other director could have made it.

6. Jean-Luc Godard and Chris Marker (tie)

I'm cheating a bit by listing these two pivotal avant-garde French filmmakers together, but in my mind they're two different sides of the same coin.

In Godard's *Alphaville* (1965), hardboiled detective Lemmy Caution rumbles into town at the wheel of his Ford Galaxy, battles an evil supercomputer, kills the mad scientist, and gets the girl. Those who have seen the film know that this plot summary means nothing, and everything. Godard's film is an extended commentary on pop culture, and a creative attempt to confront the technology of social control.

It is on that level, however, that *Alphaville* is most flawed. I found its dialectical oppositions rife—in the climax the hero destroys the omnipotent supercomputer by reciting poetry to it—and many of its attempts at satire to be clumsy. I prefer *Weekend* (1967), in which the country vacation of a bourgeois couple morphs into a horrorshow of car wrecks and cannibalism. *Weekend* is filled with images that are difficult to forget, particularly the tracking shot of a chain of wrecked cars that emerges as a portrait of contemporary capitalism. As with Jacques Tati's *Traffic* (1971) or Cronenberg's *Crash*, *Weekend* reveals the visceral origins and revolutionary potential of the automobile, which in the late, last century was the ultimate extension and enhancement of the human

Judith Klein-Dial In Praise of New Cardboard

I've been a professional bookseller for most of 24 years. Here's the best tip I know for selling your used books to a dealer for more money: put them in a new box. Sounds easy, right? People don't see why if they haul their books into my shop in trash bags I don't immediately understand that their books are really, really valuable. I'm not suggesting that you haul out a piece of velvet like a jeweler, but lose the trash bags and the old box.

Put the books in a new cardboard box and make sure there are no surprises as you transfer them. Surprises? What surprises could I mean? Your house is clean, and the box was in the attic/basement/shed/garage/mudroom and so it's clean too, right? Don't count on it. At least once a year books arrive with one of the following: sharp objects, creatures, and/or miscellaneous wren stuff.

The sharp objects are fairly obvious: broken glass, chisels, compasses, etc. If you can't take it on an airplane these days or you'd hesitate to give it to a baby to play with, I don't want to gouge, poke, or slice myself with it when I find it in your books. When I pull my hand out bleeding, I pay less.

Creatures are usually silverfish, roaches, and/or mice. I've had customers bring them all, alive and dead. If there's one live silverfish (or dead roach) at the bottom of the box, the chances are that you missed 1 or 2 or 4,000 eggs, I will then have to spend months trying

to get rid of them or their descendants by taking each book off the shelf, cleaning it and the shelf and then spraying with noxious chemicals. This is a huge annoyance and time/money drain, so I pay a lot less.

Wet stuff is the death of books. It can be as simple as the skim of oil on the garage that bled through the box and on to the cover of the used-to-be \$100 book. (The gods never let this happen except to the most valuable book in a lot.) Or it can be as involved as the lot that gets "damp" and dries out—becoming a brick. A small oil stain might (or might not) make a book unsalable. But the book brick should be sold to a drug company for testing new antihistamines. I don't want it for free. I don't want to throw it out for you . . . and I'd hesitate to let you pay me to take it.

Almost all of this is solved if you take the books out of the old box or bag; check for dampness, creatures, and sharp objects; and put them in a new, unstained, empty box before you take them to the bookstore. Your wallet and your local bookseller will both thank you. ▶

Judith Klein-Dial lives in Keene, New Hampshire, and is the manager of Genre Ink, <www.genreink.com>.

body. It ends: "fin du cinema, fin du monde."

Godard's contemporary Chris Marker, a filmmaker best known for his unclassifiable cinematic essays, is as compassionate and thoughtful as Godard is ferocious and militant. His 29-minute film "La Jetée" (1962) opened for *Alphaville* in French theaters, and represents a perfect synthesis of form and content. "La Jetée" consists almost entirely of stills—broken once, beautifully and precisely, by movement—telling the post-apocalyptic story of a prisoner hurled into the past by his jailers. Poignant and poetic, "La Jetée" is a profound meditation on the relationship between memory and technology.

Marker's "documentary" essays, such as *Le Fond de l'air est Rouge* (1977) and *Sans Soleil* (1983), are also interesting for the way they view the present through speculative eyes. To Marker, both the past and future are always close at hand, and inextricably linked. These are films made from the point of view of an alien visitor, seeing the Earth for the first time.

Godard and Marker are both highly influential—"La Jetée" inspired *12 Monkeys*, while Godard virtually invented the modern jump-cut—but they took creative, personal, and political risks that few dare take today. When I watch their films, I remember that other worlds—and other ways of telling stories—are possible.

7. Fritz Lang

Like James Whale (below), Fritz Lang created many of science fiction cinema's template images. In *Metropolis* (1926), the technological city is a spectacle that mediates social relations between owners and workers, the polarization between rich and poor reflected in the city's very architecture. While the surface of *Metropolis* is a daydream of soaring expressways and skyscrapers, the city beneath is a nightmare of toil and poverty without end. Lang's urban imagery recurs in many science fiction films—including *Blade Runner*, *Alphaville*, Tim Burton's *Gotham City*, and *The Matrix*—industrial cities that conceal irrational impulses, magical beliefs, and violent social hierarchies. Much of the plot of *Metropolis* makes no sense—the climax, in particular, is silly and wishful—but it doesn't need to make sense. When the robot Maria stands, she rises from some secret, primitive, dreaming part of our collective unconscious. As Lang clearly understood, the subterranean link between magic and technology is

Farewell to 875 Park Avenue



Our friend Pags Aubrey's farewell party to the last apartment we ever saw (all remembrances of the *Martini* jazz series set on the wall of the den).

the Rosetta Stone of science fiction.

Lang made many other important science fiction films. *Fren im Mond* (1929) is a haunting and technically innovative vision of a trip to the moon. His three Dr. Mabuse films (1922–60) constitute a lurid portrait of society in decline. After the mesmerist and criminal mastermind Dr. Mabuse dies in the first (silent) film, he appears later through others who act in his name. In the knotted and complex *The 1,000 Eyes of Dr. Mabuse* (1960)—more proto-technothriller than science fiction—every room of the Hotel Luxor is wired with a closed-circuit surveillance system. Who is watching? We all are. Dr. Mabuse—whose "just for power knows no end"—is in all of us.

8. James Cameron

Cameron is the only other Hollywood director besides Spielberg who seems capable of making consistently intelligent and mature science fiction. *The Terminator* (1984), *Aliens* (1986), *The Abyss* (1989), and *Terminator 2: Judgment Day* (1991) all succeed through their philosophical commitment and attention to character. It would be easy to read *The Terminator* and its sequel as a reiteration of anti-intellectual and technophobic Hollywood sci-fi, or as thrillers tricked out as sci-fi, yet the two films form a dialogue that in the end provides a very specific answer to the questions raised by technology. Through the transition in the cyborg's image from bad guy to good guy, the story plays out over the two films as a dialectical moral allegory that ultimately finds the human in the machine. The films ask us not to reject technology—as does, to take one of many examples, Michael Crichton's *Westworld* (1973)—but to take responsibility for it.

In all of his films, Cameron displays a talent and propensity for depicting violent spectacle (he crafts the leanest and meanest plots in all science fiction), which makes it all the more interesting that he is a genre pioneer in female characterization. Collectively, his science fiction films destroyed forever that image of the damsel in distress. Dan O'Bannon, Ridley Scott, and Sigourney Weaver created the character of Ripley in the original *Alien*, but it was in the sequel, *Aliens*, that Cameron forever fixed Ripley as an iconic feminist image and as a template for the female action heroes who followed in her wake. When we add Cameron's Ripley to the strong female images of *T2* and *The Abyss*, we see a distinct pattern that isn't present in the work of other directors. This is a particularly critical and promising development in the unusually sexist context of science fiction cinema. It's tempting (for a snob like me) to dismiss Cameron as a Hollywood filmmaker—but then, that's precisely why he's important.

9. James Whale

Whale, the director of *Frankenstein* (1931), *The Invisible Man* (1933), and *Bride of Frankenstein* (1935), drew on early science fiction literature to tell powerful allegories about the use and abuse of scientific knowledge.

Whale's expressionistic vision of Frankenstein's monster (played by Boris Karloff) is now part of the collective cultural unconscious, as archetypal to technological society as Joseph Campbell's "hero with a thousand faces." *Frankenstein* and *Bride of Frankenstein* are both filled with scenes and images that are now deeply embedded in modern culture: the laboratory of the mad scientist; the monster sitting childishly at the lakeside with the little girl he kills; and the lightning-haired bride screaming in horror when she sees her groom.

"To a new world of gods and monsters!" says Dr. Pretorius to Dr. Frankenstein in *Bride*, unveiling bell jars containing the living homunculi he's created. Dr. Pretorius obviously sees himself as the god, and his creations as monsters. It is, of course, one of the deep ironies of the Frankenstein saga that the reverse is also true. Though these films seem psychologically and philosophically primitive by today's standards, Whale's are the shoulders on which all other science fiction filmmakers stand.

10. Ridley Scott

Though the dialogue and characterization in *Blade Runner* (1982) are as clichéd as anything found in a Hollywood film, Scott's classic gave us a new visual vocabulary for describing the future. The film's ideas are embodied in its gorgeous, gloomy images, which filter all futures past—including Lang's *Metropolis* and Godard's

Alphaville—through a new cyberpunk sensibility.

Blade Runner also represents an evolutionary step in the way we view the artificial: most mainstream science fiction films prior to *Blade Runner* depict human simulacra as Gothic abominations, while in *Blade Runner* the replicants are the last vestige of humanity in a dehumanized world. Each replicant's death is truly upsetting to watch; in their last suffering, we see their humanity. In the director's cut (which Scott has taken steps to ensure will be the only one in circulation), the film ends with the conflation of the human condition with the replicants'. After the last surviving replicant saves Deckard's life, his final act is to bridge the distance between him and his adversary by sharing stories—"all these moments lost in time"—of his life. Deckard, defeated, goes to his replicant lover (whose role recalls Hari's in *Solaris*), and together they escape the city. "It's too bad she won't live," says Deckard's blade runner rival, "but then again, who does?" Thus human and machine must face death together.

Blade Runner isn't, of course, Scott's only successful science fiction film. His earlier *Alien* (1979) remains the most intelligent and metaphorical monster film ever made, the one that comes closest to

approximating David Cronenberg's vision of biological horror. In *Alien*, the alien is an externalization, a literal eruption, of our dread of bodies that decay and die. *Alien* is filled with finely observed details, both in the technology of the ship and in the interactions of its doomed crew, but it's the monster's rapid metamorphosis that makes it great. Though the sequels after *Alien* are all much more flawed, it is fitting that the series concludes with the generic merger of Ripley with the alien.

The unifying theme of my list of ten best directors: the history of science fiction cinema is the history of the gradual convergence of subject and object, alien and native, simulacra and real. From *Whale's Frankenstein* to Hollywood's B-movie alien invasions, we arrive at directors striving to transcend the fear and anxiety that accompanies technological change. They make the strange familiar, and in doing so, prepare us for the future. ▶

Jeremy Adam Smith is Director of the Independent Press Development Fund in San Francisco, and a member of the staff of the Speculative Literature Foundation.

Sethra Lavode by Steven Brust

New York: Tor Books, 2004; \$25.95 hc; 351 pages

Fool's Fate by Robin Hobb

New York: Bantam Dell, 2004; \$24.95 hc; 631 pages

reviewed by Alec Austin

In these days when fantasy series have a distressing tendency to become endlessly episodic or protracted to an absurd degree, the conclusions of trilogies or multivolume novels are perhaps more noteworthy than they would be otherwise, if only because the authors in question have chosen to bring their narrative to an end. A great deal depends on the end of a work of fiction, as it can elevate what has gone before, or undermine an otherwise moving work. And so, while I approached the final volumes of Steven Brust's *The Viscount of Adriandus* and Robin Hobb's *The Tawny Man* with a certain degree of apprehension, I am pleased to report that said apprehension was largely unfounded.

Before continuing, a few words of context are in order. Both *The Viscounts* and *The Tawny Man* are successors to previous works by the same author; in Brust's case, to the novels *The Phoenix Guards* and *Five Hundred Years After*, and in Hobb's, to her *Farseer* and (less directly) *Liveship* trilogies. As such, *The Viscount* is the final, multivolume novel in a series of three, while *The Tawny Man* is the third in a series of three interlinked trilogies, making each volume not only the conclusion of its own trilogy or novel, but also the culmination of a work that spans years. This is a great deal of weight for a book to bear, and it to Brust and Hobb's credit that their books hold up so well.

Onward, then, to *Sethra Lavode*, final volume of Paarf of Roundwood's longest work to date. The central conceit of *Viscount*, as with *The Phoenix Guards* and *Five Hundred Years After* before it, is that they are works of historical fiction written by Paarf of Roundwood, an inhabitant of the Empire of Dragarea in which Brust's Vlad Taltos novels are set. As such, they function not only as tales of swashbuckling adventure written in a style reminiscent of Dumas and the French Romantics, but also as a parody of that style's excesses, which is revealed by adversaries being so exquisitely polite to one another that pages of dialogue elapse before a fight begins, and when Paarf spends a page and a half protesting that he will not impede the story's course with a unnecessarily detailed description of the surrounding landscape, or by introducing a particular character. While these digressions and exchanges might annoy a reader who desires only an uncomplicated adventure story, more appreciative readers will be amused and delighted by the games Brust plays with Paarf's pomposity and the assiduous manners of his protagonists.

Like the volumes that preceded it, *Sethra Lavode* concerns itself with Khaavren, Captain of the Phoenix Guards, and his three companions, Aerich, Tazenda, and Pel. These volumes also introduce

Khaavren's son Piro, and his companions; the Empress Zenika; the pretender Kana, and a supporting cast that includes the eponymous sorcerer. Zenika has returned from the Paths of the Dead with the Imperial Orb, and having already defended herself against Kana's forces once, is gathering the Houses of the Empire to her side. Meanwhile, Kana and his supporters have hatched a scheme that they believe will allow him to seize the Orb from Zenika, while allowing those of his entourage who wish to avenge themselves on Khaavren and his companions to do so without risk to themselves.

The scheme is enacted. Our protagonists foil Kana's usurpation, their adversaries' revenge plot, and the end of the world, though not without terrible loss to their company. As a consequence of these losses, the estrangement between Khaavren and Piro is reconciled. The tone of the book becomes solemn as the funeral rites for fallen friends and companions are enacted and the book comes to its conclusion.

What is most notable about *Sethra Lavode*, not only in contrast to the prior volumes of *Viscount*, but also *The Phoenix Guards* and *Five Hundred Years After*, is how starkly it depicts the annihilation of characters whom the reader has come to know and love. While it is true that the conclusion of *Five Hundred Years After* involved the annihilation of Dragarea City and a number of sympathetic supporting characters, not only the scale of the destruction but the characters' subsidiary roles and Paarf's narration served as barriers to the reader having strong emotional reactions to the carnage. *Sethra Lavode* does not fall prey to any of these impediments; the characters who die are important and well known to the reader, and the scene is presented with a stark clarity uncharacteristic of Brust's Paarf-persona. This narrative withdrawal is extremely effective in heightening the emotional effect of the death scene and the funeral scenes that follow, and Brust should be commended for his deft handling of it.

I must confess that there were times when I was reading *Fool's Fate* when I wished for a similar withdrawal from the involved narration of FitzChivalry Farseer, the protagonist of both *The Tawny Man* and *The Farseer Trilogy*, which preceded it.

Like *Sethra Lavode*, *Fool's Fate* opens on a complicated political tangle, with Fitz ready to accompany young Prince Dorifal to the Out Islands, where he has sworn to slay the Dragon Icefey as one of the conditions of his marrying the Narcheska Elizania. However, Icefey is seen as a protector by many of the Out Islanders, and there is debate as to whether the Prince should even be allowed to undertake the task. In addition, Fitz and his former master Chadic suspect that there is more

to the Narcheska's request for the dragon's head than there seems, and Fitz must navigate this labyrinth of diplomacy and intrigue while dealing with another dragon that haunts his dreams and those of his daughter, who has been raised without knowledge of her parentage.

While *The Tawny Man* is not as bleak as the unrelenting *Farsier*, Fitz still wallows in self-pity with regularity, which makes parts of *Fool's Fate* difficult to endure. In addition, while the politics surrounding the Winted and the splinter faction of Piebalds (which drove the action of the first two volumes of *The Tawny Man*) are still present in *Fool's Fate*, they are overshadowed by the quest for the dragon's head and issues of diplomacy in the Out Islands. This shift in emphasis began towards the end of *Golden Fool*, the prior volume of the series, but Hobb's decision to tie up that plot thread off-screen at the book's end is structurally unsatisfying.

If this sounds harsh, it is because the books that preceded *Fool's Fate* raised more issues than a single volume could possibly resolve in detail. There was no effective way in which *Fool's Fate* could have dealt with the Piebalds and the Winted at length while still handling the action in the Out Islands and resolving the plot threads left over from the end of *The Farsier Trilogy*. Given the options she had, Hobb made the right choice. Although Fitz and Chade are a tad too slow in grasping the nature of the intrigues they are embroiled in, once the truth is revealed the story proceeds apace, building to an inevitable, affecting, and apocalyptic climax.

All prior nitpicking aside, if *Fool's Fate* has a fundamental flaw, it is that its conclusion feels sugarcoated, as if Hobb chose to pull her punches. While the Paarl books are superficially light, there is an undercurrent of darkness running beneath their humor, surfacing just

often enough to make the shift in tone at the end of *Seltra Lavade* seem natural. The books of *The Farsier Trilogy*, on the other hand, are quite possibly the darkest and most haunting fantasy series of the last decade, and while *Fool's Errand* and *Golden Fool* alloyed the teenage desolation of *Farsier* with Fitz's greater maturity, their overall result was that of failure mixed with pyrrhic victory. This is not to say that Fitz's victory at the climax of *Fool's Fate* is unalloyed with tragedy, but rather that, in the context of what had gone before, it did not seem tragic enough. Fitz's final contentment at the novel's end comes slowly and at great cost; would that the price of his victory had been higher as well.

That said, how do *Fool's Fate* and *Seltra Lavade* fare as the ends of their respective series? If one takes *Fool's Fate* solely as the end of *The Tawny Man*, it is tolerable but not brilliant; as the conclusion of Fitz's story, begun in *Assassin's Apprentice*, it fares much better. This is unsurprising, as *Fool's Fate*'s focus on the Out Islands and the aftermath of the Red Ship War resonates strongly with the events of the previous series and gains much of its power to affect through the tension between Fitz's past and his present. While far from flawless, *Fool's Fate*, the rest of *The Tawny Man*, and *The Farsier Trilogy* are all worthy of attention.

My praise for *Seltra Lavade*, *The Viscount of Adrilankha*, and the previous works of Paarl of Roundwood is much less qualified. Through Paarl, Steven Brust has achieved a blend of sly humor, swashbuckling adventure, and heroic melodrama that is nothing short of brilliant. One can only hope that *The Viscount of Adrilankha* will enjoy the success it so richly deserves. ▶

Alex Austin lives in Portland, Oregon.

Envisioning the Future: Science Fiction and the Next Millennium, edited by Marleen S. Barr

Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 2003; \$22.95 hc; 205 pages

reviewed by Greg Beatty

Envisioning the Future is an uneven, strange, challenging, and ultimately useful anthology. This peculiar mix of qualities comes from three major sources: the nature of the work itself, the editor, and the collection's focus.

As a work, *Envisioning the Future* is multiply hybrid. It is hybrid first because it contains reprints and original work. It also hybridizes fiction and nonfiction. Two examples of this hybridization are "Review: What Was Science Fiction?" by Eric Rabkin and "Review: Science in the Third Millennium" by Kim Stanley Robinson. Both are fictional, in that they review imaginary books. But both have clear critical functions, and both integrate references to actual historical figures and to known critical principles. The anthology is also a hybrid because some of the pieces included are revisions or revisions of earlier work. Rabkin's imaginary review provides a good brief example here as usual. While the tone is light, and the review is filled with sf-jokes, the historical and critical perspectives on science fiction provided are accessible, compressed versions of those he developed in his longer (and quite valuable) histories of science fiction. More curious is James Gunn's story "The End-of-the-World Ball." It's a piece about the coming of the millennium in the year 2000. It reads almost like slipstream because it seems to be predicting the past, in ways that are at times so accurate and insightful commentary upon what happened, but at other times are curiously off. It also feels stylistically dated in ways that only make sense once one reads Gunn's endnote to the piece. It was originally written in the 1970s, and then revised in the 1990s, and it still bears the marks of Gunn's thirty years of musing on futurism and catastrophe.

Envisioning the Future is curiously hybrid in its structure. It is divided into four sections (Future Past, Future Present, Future Perfect, and Future Critical), plus a preface and an introduction. This both seems a bit busy and curiously arbitrary for a work in which so many pieces discuss the challenging nature of dealing with categories. Almost any of the pieces could have been placed into another category, and their current organization often places false expectations on them, or falsely limits them. For example, the most complex and critically informed piece, Darko Suvin's "Reflections on What Remains of

Zamyatin's *We* after the Change of Leviathans: Must Collectivism Be Against the People?" is found in Future Present—though it is densely concerned with the past of Zamyatin's context and the critical possibilities for the future.

One assumes that a portion of this organizational hybridity comes from the editor, who is the second source of the work's curious mix of qualities. Marleen S. Barr is herself a complex figure. The three pieces she contributes to this anthology, and the anthology itself, testify to this. On the one hand, Barr has published a string of impressive work. In 1997, the Science Fiction Research Association gave her their Pilgrim Award for lifetime achievement in science fiction criticism. Barr has done important critical work, especially in conceptualizing feminist science fiction, and she has a record of conceiving and completing impressive projects. On the other hand, the three pieces in this anthology are unimpressive, even self-indulgent at times. Her preface combines biographical musings on what the future and the year 2000 have meant to her personally, with unconvincing critical musings on several illustrations (the cover art, Grant Wood's *American Gothic*, and a picture of Barr with astronaut Buzz Aldrin). If these are unconvincing, the political discussion later in the preface was facile. To say that "Bush's missile shield plan positions him as Darth Vader" or to argue, as she does directly thereafter, that "Bush/Vader" opposes the master narrative of American history is to miss the complexity of that history, to miss—as contributors such as Suvin or Rosi Braidotti might point out—the fact that we don't have a single unified master narrative, but exist within a complex chord of interwoven narratives. In short, Barr simply seems out of her element when discussing politics, whether directly, as in the preface, or slightly more obliquely, as in her fable "Superfeminist; or, A Hanukkah Carol" found in the Future Perfect section of the book. Barr deserves a lot of credit for assembling the impressive cast of contributors for *Envisioning the Future* and for bringing the project to fruition, but her own work here needed the attention of an editor.

Overall, though, the complex nature of *Envisioning the Future* comes in no small part from the nature of its subject, which was, as the subtitle reminds us, science fiction and the next millennium. Science

fiction, already hybrid between science and fiction, has long been subject to crises of identity. To throw in the challenges of both the millennium and the future is sure to produce both rich results and flailing about, sometimes at the same time. This combination is what makes the work challenging and useful, and I'd like to spend the rest of my attention on these elements of *Evisonning the Future*.

Let me move on to the fiction. Gunn's story has already been mentioned. In addition to this writer and scholar of long standing (and Barr's unsatisfying fable), Barr includes fiction by George Zebrowski, Harlan Ellison, Kim Stanley Robinson, and Pamela Sargent. Even from this list of names several points are immediately evident. First, though brief, this is an impressive list of contributors. Second, it is an accomplished list, which is another way of saying this is a list of writers both with reputations (no risks here), and, to be blunt, older creators. Pamela Sargent (born in 1948), Robinson (born 1952) and Barr herself (born 1953), are the youngest fiction writers included. On the one hand, this provides perspective. On the other, mature writers are by definition not part of the currently maturing generation, or generations, and this shows; there is a sense that all of this fiction is a bit distanced from the visceral experience of embracing the new that happens in younger writers. (This collection cries out for a Charles Stross story, or, younger still, something by China Miéville.)

It is also an interesting list for other reasons. Ellison is a powerhouse writer, but he has not made his career primarily as a futurist, rather as a stylist and political commentator on the present. Indeed, his story, "Goodbye to All That," is filled with acute observations about contemporary culture, but as a story, it is more of a slipstream nostalgia piece about aging and identity, as well as a celebration of things Ellison has loved. Zebrowski's "The Coming of Christ the Joker" might qualify as a hybrid itself. It is intelligent and insightful, delivering cogent discussions of fairly contemporary culture (though Gore Vidal and Larry King both seem a bit dated as cultural markers) and larger philosophical and scientific issues. It is also closer to being a blend of Platonic dialogue and allegory than satisfying fiction. There is much intellectual froth, little emotion, and no character development.

In fact, of all the fiction included, the only satisfying pieces are Robinson's brief meditative reflection "Review: Science in the Third Millennium," and "Utmost Bones" by Pamela Sargent. Robinson's review of two fictional works on the history of science isn't really a story, but, like Zebrowski's piece, it borrows fictional techniques to make its intelligent observations more entertaining. Sargent's story belongs in a different category. It still falls prey to the talking heads trap, as main character Kaeti discusses the meaning of identity, memory, and the implications of information technology with representatives of a cybernetic world-mind. However, Kaeti feels real, and her melancholy fannishings for wholeness and happiness in the midst of informational wealth feel too real and pertinent.

If I had to sum up the fiction portion, I'd say it is not really satisfying in itself, but it does a good, if somewhat limited, job of exploring the anthology's theme. It is the nonfiction, though, that is the real meat of *Evisonning the Future*. Beyond Barr's preface and introduction, there are six pieces of nonfiction, each of which deserves attention for different reasons, and each of which contributes something special to the question of science fiction at the millennium.

The shortest and most accessible of these is Walter Mosley's brief essay "Black to the Future." Author of the Easy Rawlins mysteries (Devil in a Blue Dress) and other mystery series, Mosley is also a lifelong reader of science fiction who has been writing science fiction in recent years. "Black to the Future" paints a picture of science fiction as a realm of possibilities for African Americans, one into which they must move and are moving. Mosley predicts an explosion of Black science fiction in the near future, and this piece clearly strikes a chord, as it appeared in the *New York Times Magazine* and the first *Dark Matter* anthology.

"Love and Sex in the Year 3000" by Marge Piercy blends enjoyable personal reflections on how love, sex, gender, and families have changed in the past with intelligent, informed considerations about how they might change in the future. Together with the Mosley piece though, it seems interestingly essentialist. That is to say, each of these academic theorists trumpets the need to not essentialize about

identity—but the female feminist wrote about love and sex, and the black sf writer wrote about Black sf. While this makes sense, it also casts light on how difficult it is to escape the past and our own assumptions. (I for one would have loved to see these authors shake things up, and dive into new territory. Even swapping territory would make for interesting experimental perspectives. What about Piercy on Black sf? Mosley on sex in 3000 A.D.?)

Neil Postman first made a large splash in the public sphere with his 1986 book *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Slow Business*, which analyzed the powerful impact television has had on culture. He's followed that with a series of analytical works, all of which are well informed, and all of which sound related notes. His piece, "Building a Bridge to the Eighteenth Century," covers in brief the arguments developed at length in his 1999 book, *Building a Bridge to the 18th Century: How the Past Can Improve Our Future*. Postman's points seem at once thrilling, intelligent, and frustrating. The thrill comes from his intelligent discussion of the earlier information age that was the eighteenth century, and his reminder of how the greats of that era dealt with their information explosions and scientific changes. Postman's essay offers inspiration—until one turns to the other essays in the collection.

When Postman is closely followed, as he is here, by Suvin's dense, ambitious essay on Zamyatin (only Gunn's story separates them), it doesn't just feel as if the two authors shifted historical focus—it feels as if they come from and are discussing different worlds. Postman's tone is reassuring, and he gives the impression that not only can that which is traditionally best in humans be saved, but we already have the tools to do so, in traditional critical thinking and liberal arts. Postman makes the contemporary situation seem challenging but manageable.

Suvin's essay, by contrast, is more ambitious, more depressing, and ultimately more convincing. It is more ambitious because Suvin uses his discussion of Zamyatin's classic dystopian novel *We* as a springboard to discuss contemporary changes in culture. His core claim is that we are undergoing a change of Hobbesian Leviathans—that we are still in the belly of an oppressive beast, but one that is transforming around us even as we crouch within it. Suvin's discussion of Zamyatin places *We*'s character structure and thematic development in a useful cultural context, providing a cascade of insights into how best to understand the work. However, when discussing the change in Leviathans, Suvin is ambiguously successful. That is to say, he cogently argues that change is happening, but he's less convincing about what that change is. There are a number of reasons for this, not the least of which is Suvin's impressive willingness to tackle the largest cultural questions of our time, but one of them is his relative underemphasis on change. Suvin writes as if the nature of the overarching social structures under which we labor have changed but without fully integrating the implications of some of the forces transforming us. To restate that more simply, Suvin integrates the insights of history, philosophy, and critical studies without fully examining the challenges that technoculture (information technology, body modification, gene engineering, etc.) bring to the individual.

Fortunately, that is one of Rosi Braidotti's topics in "Cyberteratologies: Female Monsters Negotiate the Other's Participation in Humanity's Far Future." Braidotti examines the discourse of monsters and the monstrous in contemporary society. Denser than Suvin's essay as far as the number of references to outside theory, it is marginally less dense conceptually. Braidotti applies contemporary critical theory to science fiction (both historical and present) to examine how the monstrous is treated. Some of her conclusions are hasty—for example, to say that contemporary sf "reflects our sense of estrangement regarding the rapidity of current change" is to read contemporary sf very selectively indeed—but on the whole, the essay offers a number of insights into science fiction's role in larger culture. In particular, Braidotti's focus on the individual subject, especially the monstrous, alienated subject (so often the female subject) works well with Suvin's more social and structural approach.

More immediately interesting for many science fiction readers will be "You Must Have Seen a Lot of Changes: Fiction Beyond the Twenty-First Century" by Patrick Parrinder. Parrinder tackles the

issue of historical change on a grand scale most directly and most textually. That is to say, Parrinder looks at how science fiction authors have dealt with a range of futures, groups them into categories, and draws conclusions about them. Parrinder's closing observation about how assumptions about our technological limits have placed limits on the science fictional imagination is both fascinating and useful. It points to gaps in current science fiction and to trends that subsume individual creators, even those who think of themselves as engaged in informed rebellion against the status quo.

In conclusion, *Envisioning the Future* is ungainly, ambitious (all this is jammed into just over 200 pages), intriguing, and useful. I've

mentioned my main wish for what might have been—that other/younger writers be included in the fiction sections, and that the theorists take bolder risks—but I'm glad *Envisioning the Future* exists. It tackles the important topic of science fiction and the future. In doing so, it produces useful juxtapositions of fiction and nonfiction. The resulting mix offers new perspectives on futurism for the science fiction writer, and it calls for much greater self-awareness regarding the nature of the self, politics, and change in the genre. All of that is very useful indeed. ▶

Greg Beatty lives in Bellingham, Washington.

Spin State by Chris Moriarty

New York: Bantam Spectra, 2003; \$11.95 tpb; 485 pages
reviewed by Russell Blackford

In the relatively near future, Earth has become uninhabitable as a result of "postindustrial desertification." Climate change has led to ecological disaster, though there are plans to restore the global environment and seed the planet with stored genetic material. Meanwhile, the main human population has been evacuated to an artificial construct, the Ring, where the various cultures and nationalities remain as suspicious of each other as ever, though the UN exercises an overall legal authority. Thanks to the invention of faster-than-light travel, new societies have also been established on the planets of other star systems. Some of these remain under UN control, but others have broken away in defiance—and the authorities seem to have lost track of still others.

Against this political backdrop, the characters of Chris Moriarty's *Spin State* include advanced Artificial Intelligences that have emerged into self-awareness and are now struggling for political emancipation, as well as genetically engineered posthumans, some of them "wired" with extensive nonbiological hardware. In fact, the book's main character, Major Catherine Li, is a "genetic construct" who has managed to alter the official records on her biological background in order to escape a requirement for registration. She works as a UN Peacekeeper and is thoroughly wired with "ceramsteel" augmentations.

Welcome, then, to a posthuman, postcyberpunk future. In this vision of how things might pan out, the human and nonhuman (or more-than-human) characters can communicate via a virtual reality called "the spinstream," in which messages are sent and received faster than light, using a quantum-entanglement technology, and with such richness of transmitted sensory information as to produce the impression of face-to-face contact. With its edgy characters, their intimate involvement with technology, and the evocative of virtual-reality interaction, *Spin State* could easily be a further extrapolation of William Gibson's work from the 1980s. Moriarty is obviously influenced by Gibson, even down to the level of style, since her prose contains much the same mix of gritty texture and high-tech poetry.

Though she is no Gibson clone, it is fair to compare the two writers for another reason. Not since I first read Gibson's *Neuromancer*—some twenty years ago—have I encountered a first novel in the field that is as commanding as *Spin State* in its creation of a strange yet plausible future, described in authoritative prose. After only a few pages, I knew I was in the presence of a talent similar to Gibson's in scope, power, and ambition, as well as sensibility.

Spin State is part political thriller, part detective novel, and part posthuman love story, since much of it concerns the relationship between Li and her ex-lover, Cohen. The question is: Can she trust him? Cohen is an urbane and charming—but perhaps also scheming—AI, with whom Li can have actual physical contact only when he "shunts" through a human body under his control (the same shunting technology can also be used by humans to control the minds and bodies of others, sometimes against their will).

AIs, we are told, are referred to as "he" as ships are called "she," but this seems to be no more than a convention. They do not have bodies of their own and can shunt through those of either men or

women. Indeed, Cohen often uses female bodies to act in the physical world, creating a disorienting effect when he continues to be referred to as "he."

For her part, Li seems to relate sexually to Cohen no matter what kind of body he is using, and her one other sexual relationship portrayed in the novel is with a genetically engineered woman called Bella. Li's sexuality is presented in a matter-of-fact way that is quite refreshing, suggesting that sexual orientation might simply not be an issue in the future. That, of course, is a common of trope, but I have seldom seen it handled with such ease as Moriarty achieves here.

Early in the action of *Spin State*, Li is placed in charge of a military raid which goes terribly wrong, though it is clear that she has been set up and that she has responded as well as possible in impossible circumstances. Pending the final decision in her subsequent court martial, she is reassigned to solve the mystery surrounding a mine fire that killed Hannah Sharifi, a celebrated theoretical physicist whose work made possible the UN's network of instantaneous transport and communication. The novel gradually turns into the story of a murder investigation, as it becomes clear that Sharifi's death was no accident.

From this point, most of the events take place in or around the mine on Compton's World, where crystals that contain naturally occurring Bose-Einstein condensate are extracted from seams of coal, deep underground. The condensate is vital for faster-than-light technologies, and it seems that the continued viability of those technologies is at stake. The setup on Compton's World enables Moriarty to give us extremely detailed, convincing, and rather grim descriptions of the operation of what amounts to a near-future coal mine. Her knowledge of mining is extraordinary; it seems that she'd be capable of writing a convincing mainstream novel about mining operations, set in the here and now.

However, the difficulty for the reader is that the plot becomes highly complex about halfway through the novel, and the action tends to bog down, as both we and Li spend time trying to work out the real motives of the characters, none of whom are necessarily all they seem. Li herself often makes incorrect judgments about their motivations. This ambiguity of motivation is, of course, standard whodunnit fare, but it is carried to quite an extreme here, in a book that already has the complication of taking place in an elaborate posthuman future. It is difficult to follow every twist and turn as the end approaches, and I remain confused about some small points even after two readings.

With that caveat, *Spin State* is an enjoyable, impressive, and even important book. It opens up the possibilities for other writers to work in this kind of postcyberpunk mode, and it is near enough to classic 1980s cyberpunk in themes and style to show that its possibilities are not entirely played out. Almost as importantly, Moriarty has created a generous secondary reality that could provide the setting for more novels, without necessarily having to write a direct sequel. Judging by this first novel, she is a major new talent. ▶

Russell Blackford lives in Melbourne, Australia.

The Donor by Frank M. Robinson

New York: Forge Books, 2004; \$24.95 hc; 368 pages

reviewed by Stacie Hanes

Some of the scariest science fiction out there is about invasion, penetration, and theft; as much as rogue asteroids thrill us and robos chill us, it has always been the intimate, insidious violation of our bodies that gives us the deep-down wiggles. Oh, sure, we object to the idea of a massive lump of space clutter bringing on a new ice age, ending life as we know it, and so on—but it's a terribly impersonal scenario. Being sliced open, rummaged, and robbed of your stock parts is another kind of thing, one we don't like at all. "Personal space" is what we call a little area around ourselves, into which the uninvited may not enter without causing us discomfort. The retroperitoneal space is probably as personal a space as you're likely to find, and the thought of unauthorized access to it provokes what one might call a visceral response.

Frank M. Robinson's new novel, *The Donor*, takes considerable advantage of that communal dread. Dennis Heller, the main character, finds himself living in an urban legend. Unfortunately for him, it isn't the one about e-mailing a few hundred of his closest friends so that Bill Gates will send him a check for \$1000. No, Dennis wakes up one day to find that he is being deconstructed, piecemeal. Lots of things are more awful if they're drawn out—death being one of those things. Being cut apart and sold for parts preys on all sorts of vague anxieties, from the ancient fear of being eaten, to the modern fear of the sinister wealthy who can purchase anything, including your life if they want it. For Dennis, all of those fears are real and immediate.

Organ theft is a cherished part of American scarelore, but in the wild, the concept is too rickety to stand up under any sort of scrutiny. Robinson fixes that. One of the weaknesses of the "kidney thieves" urban legend (which involves a very sore, disoriented victim waking in a bathtub full of ice to find a handy cell phone and a note reading "call 911 if you want to live") is that it's idiotic to suppose organ harvesters

would be ethical enough to care so much for their victims—phone, ice, 911? Just kill 'em, already. Robinson takes this into account, giving a plausible reason for keeping the donor alive.

Of course, the reason for keeping Dennis alive is a horrible one that plays on other fears common in modern America. Not many of us consciously fear being used, while we last, as life support systems for organs that someone else will come to collect whenever they like, but we subconsciously fear other things. We don't trust doctors as much as we used to. People know that doctors have power over health, even life and death, what doctors do to us often hurts, but we must allow it because the doctor knows more than we do. Watching the news, it's easy to get the idea that people with wealth, power, and influence can get anything they want; with a close look at a detailed bill for a trip to the emergency ward of a hospital, it's even easier to get the idea that medicine is closely tied to money, and lots of it. The tension between moneyed interest and human rights is a constant presence in our lives. We're primed to find poor Dennis's troubles perfectly plausible, because Robinson knows exactly where our cultural insecurities lie.

It shouldn't be surprising that Robinson knows us pretty well; he's been studying people, through what they read, for years. His book *Pulp Culture: The Art of Fiction Magazine* is a study of one part of American popular culture. Pulp fiction and urban legends are fruit of the same tree.

The Donor is a fast-paced technothriller with elements of near-future sf, living in the place where horror, science fiction, and the suspense novel mingle freely, where technology slightly beyond the state of the art serves as a tool for manipulating our deep fears of being preyed upon. ▀

Stacie Hanes lives in Youngstown, Ohio.

Clade by Mark Budz

New York: Bantam, 2003; \$6.99 pb; 376 pages

reviewed by Joe Sanders

Where are the Ace SF Specials now that readers really need them? Back in the 1960s, Terry Carr and Don Wohlheim realized that readers needed some way to recognize the books that editors were proud of, beyond the routine stuff that every publisher must produce to fill its monthly list. Carr and Wohlheim understood how difficult it was for a new writer to get serious attention from readers who tend to pick up the latest book by an established favorite.

So Ace gave one book each month a distinctive design to separate it from the crowd. A few of the original Specials were reprints but many were new (including Le Guin's *The Left Hand of Darkness* and Lafferty's *Past Master*). When Carr relaunched the line in 1984, all the books were first novels by such writers as Michael Swanwick, Kim Stanley Robinson, and Lucius Shepard. Another Special relevant here was William Gibson's *Neuromancer*. (Kevin Anderson's cover quote compares *Clade* to *Neuromancer* as a breakthrough, even saying that "Budz may well have created a new genre: BioPunk.") But then the Specials ended. Perhaps the books didn't really sell much better than the rest or the list, or perhaps they called attention to how less-than-special the rest of the list was. In any event, that kind of recommendation isn't available any more to aid readers and reviewers. So how can we tell when a paperback by an unfamiliar writer is special?

That brings us to *Clade*, which knocked around in manuscript for years from one publisher to another, finally came out looking like a more or less typical mass-market paperback, but began to get good word-of-mouth mention, even attracting enough readers to appear on *Locus*'s Best First Novel list for 2003. Yes, *Clade* deserves your attention. Yes, it's worth hunting up wherever you look for less-than-fresh paperbacks. It may be a fluke or a harbinger, hard to say yet, but Budz has a distinctive style and a nicely skewed outlook that makes this first novel stand out.

A note about the writing first. *Clade* actually is more innovative than *Neuromancer*. Gibson's first novel is written in a slightly updated version of Raymond Chandler's softened and romanticized hardboiled pulp style. Budz is a lot more violent and crude, not to mention sneakier. *Clade*'s first paragraph is pretty nondescript background info, presented in a neutral tone. It places the action in the San Francisco area, mentions a character named Rigo who turns out to be the main protagonist, and sets him in motion, off to see his sick mother. Only the name of a restaurant—Salmon Ella's—is jarring, but not enough to throw readers quite off balance. Then they hit the second paragraph:

The air in the train is full of sniffers, strings of broad-spectrum glycoproteins that are the molecular equivalent of flypaper, Rigo imagines he can feel them infiltrating his clothes, probing his asshole, prying underneath his fingernails for illegular molecules. As a countermeasure, he's taken precautions. A few minutes before boarding, he dosed himself with anti-sense blockers, sticky proteins that will attach to the sniffers and cripple them as effectively as two dogs locked in a frenzied coupling. (3)

And it goes on like that.

What the hell? Huh? Bio-jargon and fucking dogs?

This is typical of the way Budz delivers information in dense clots, jamming the readers' expectations and demonstrating that *Clade*'s world isn't even as relatively close as late twentieth-century noir. It's effective, yes, but it does take some getting used to. (Typing this review, I've noticed how my word processing program is re-underlining unfamiliar words all over the place.) Readers should figure on stopping several times to figure out bio-commercial slang and to let their brains absorb unfamiliar concepts.

Fortunately, the action is compelling enough to pull readers through succeeding levels of complexity and bafflement. All the biotalk is relevant because Rigo's world has gone through an eco-catastrophe that many species of life are extinct, new diseases are afflicting humanity, etc. Not that this has deterred researchers from continuing their dedicated efforts to Make Life Better Through Biochemistry. In short, everything has changed but nothing has changed.

Rigo takes the appalling situation pretty much for granted. It's what he's used to, all he knows—or lets himself know. He accepts, for example, the fact that corporations can control their workers' peer associations by manipulating their pheromones. Success means acquiring new associates but suddenly being unable to tolerate the presence of your former cohorts. None of this bothers Rigo very much. He's a largely passive guy, just anxious to earn a secure place in his company, even though his brother distributes blackmarket drugs/medicines, his lover is a social worker who stumbles across

evidence of really horrific experiments with children, and his mother is suffering from a disease that may have been bioengineered to dispose of the elderly poor. Each of these characters turns out to be more complicated than he or she looks at first. Rigo is the least interesting initially, the slowest to develop. He doesn't look like promising hero material because he certainly doesn't want to think about tough decisions. But that makes his ultimate commitment more satisfying.

Like *Neuromancer*, the story in *Clade* obviously is incomplete. There will be other books, showing whether Budz can sustain and build on this intense complexity or be remembered as a one-hit wonder. According to the ad in the back of *Clade*, Budz's *Crusade* will be out this fall.

Then maybe we'll know. ►

Joe Sanders lives in Mentor, Ohio.

!Limekiller! by Avram Davidson

Baltimore: Old Earth Books, 2003; \$30.00 hc; 312 pages
reviewed by James L. Cambias

One of the big secrets of fantastic fiction is that the writers are magpies. Instead of making stuff up, they mine history for ideas. Why invent a fictional culture for an alien world or a magical kingdom when you can simply use the wonders of our own world? A legion of re-branded Belisariuses (Belisari?) have marched through the pages of fantasy and military science fiction. Lazier writers have produced embarrassingly obvious swipes from reality: anyone remember Cleve Cartmill's warring "Scilla" and "Saxa"?

In the hands of someone like Avram Davidson, however, the use of real places and history to inspire fantasy goes far beyond just a gimmick or source of ideas. He turned it into an art form with his stories about not-quite-historical times and places like the Middle Roman Empire or the Triune Monarchy of Scythia-Pannonia-Transbalkania, as well as tales set in pre-Civil War New York. Of course, Davidson had the advantage of being incredibly well-read and remarkably well-traveled. Who else could write a story about having lunch with a eunuch in China based on firsthand experience? (Okay, maybe L. Sprague de Camp could have, but he didn't.)

The new collection !Limekiller! from Old Earth Books gathers all six of Davidson's stories of the eponymous Jack Limekiller and his adventures in the nonexistent but real land of British Hidalgo, a Central American remnant of Victoria's empire on the verge of independence.

This may be Davidson's best work. It has all his virtues. His gossipy erudition is on display in almost every paragraph, along with his ability to see the comic aspects of people without reducing them to caricatures, and his amazing ear for all the different ways of speaking English. The only other writer whose style is even remotely like Davidson's is T. H. White—if White had been an American, an sf writer, a Jew, and a resident of Belize for a time.

Are the Limekiller stories magic realism? Probably. They're set in Latin America, after all. But the Limekiller stories are so wonderfully strange they need a genre of their own. Call it magic journalism. Davidson went to Belize, he saw the iguanas in the trees, he heard (and, doubtless, read) the folk tales of men marrying manates and of horrible creatures lurking in the jungle, and he probably spent some time in tumbledown colonial bars listening to the local drunks and crackpots.

The present collection also includes some of Davidson's nonfiction writing about Belize, "Along the Lower Moho (the Dragon Church)," as well as memoirs by Grania Davis and Ethan Davidson filling in more of the backstory of Davidson's brief tenure as a Belizean landed proprietor. One would be hard-pressed to find a difference between Davidson's "nonfiction" and the six works of "fiction" in the book, except that the protagonist of one is named "Avram Davidson" while the others concern a Canadian named Jack Limekiller.

Like Davidson's memoir, the stories (the fictional stories, that is)

are not what one would call plot-driven. A useful summary that would apply to just about all six goes something like "Jack Limekiller bums around a town in British Hidalgo, chaps with the local drunks and crackpots, and has a brush with something paranormal that leaves him bewildered." This is not to say they're not wonderful tales, but if you're looking for North American briskness of action, British Hidalgo is not the place to find it.

The tropical language of the plotting is surely deliberate, a way for Davidson to get the reader into a properly Caribbean frame of mind. (It also lets him get away with endless but interesting Davidsonian digressions on things like the etymology of the word "duppy" or the reluctance of transplanted Filipino Chinese merchant clans to sell turtle eggs.)

The Limekiller stories are also refreshingly realistic in the way the characters react to the various intrusions of the fantastic. Usually they do so by running like hell, having a good stiff drink, and doing their best to forget all about it. Nobody wants to get all cannonned up and go down into the crypt looking for trouble. Least of all the colonial authorities—causes all kinds of difficulty with the chaps back in London. At one point Limekiller's tendency to get mixed up in bizarre happenings is a source of considerable friction in his relationship with his lady-love, the graceful copper-haired Felix. Would you want to marry someone who keeps running into maritime ghosts or cursed cats? One or two brushes with the Unexplained might make for some good after-dinner anecdotes, but when it becomes a habit, well . . .

There is a neat little bit of deliberate irony here, since Davidson's fictional "British Hidalgo" is right next to the Spanish-speaking "Republic of Hidalgo," of which the most famous nonresident landowner was not Avram Davidson, or even Jack Limekiller, but the redoubtable Clark "Doc" Savage in Lester Dent's pulp novels. Which just goes to show that British Hidalgo is very different from its neighbor.

The ongoing rediscovery of Avram Davidson is a great thing for all of us who have spent time tracking down his work in small press anthologies and out-of-print paperbacks. One can only dream of the day when a major publisher brings out a Davidson collection aimed at mass market distribution.* The real pity, of course, is that Avram Davidson has to be "rediscovered" at all. He was there all along, and sales and recognition are much easier to enjoy while you're alive. Those of us who are alive at the moment can content ourselves with enjoying !Limekiller! ►

James L. Cambias lives in Deerfield, Massachusetts.

*It is a sad fact of contemporary U. S. publishing that no short story collections are published in mass market any longer, for slightly larger values of "na." —the eds.

Screed

(letters of comment)

Ellen Kushner, Somerville, Massachusetts

I very much enjoyed David Drake's heartfelt essay, "Faith, Hope, and Charity." It reminded me of a quote that I keep over my desk, attributed to the first-century Greco-Roman Jewish philosopher Philo of Alexandria: "Be kind, for everyone you meet is fighting a hard battle."

Phyllis Gottlieb, Toronto, Ontario

I think I may have something to say in *NYRSF* after all: a bit of *Screed*.

Joe Milicia, in his review of Brian Attebery's "Decoding Gender" in July's issue of *NYRSF* (#191), says, second to the last paragraph:

The last part of the last chapter . . . brings up important material on which Attebery is naturally an expert: the debate over whether his and Le Guin's *Norton Anthology* is biased in favor of women writers.

I never knew of this debate. According to my count, twenty-five of the sixty-seven stories in the anthology were written by women. If the women-men ratio of 1 and 1/2 was still 1:2 that might be considered just possibly biased.

But I notice in *Locus*'s latest issue listing seven Year's Best anthologies that the women's shares of the contents are: 2/28, 11/39, 4/20, 8/21, 2/14, 2/9, and 4/25. What about some debate on those figures?

(I hope this is useful, because I found those figures shocking.)

Joe Milicia, Sheboygan, Wisconsin

Got the latest *NYRSF* (#191), which has several things I want to read. As for my own review, I see that when I sent it to you I wrote: "Here is the Attebery review; maybe I should keep it longer to look for ways of improving it, but I think I should send it at this point." Probably I should have sat on it for a couple of days more, since I was struck right away by a couple of infelicitous sentences, notably one where "their" could refer to "ladies" instead of "monsters." One thing that surprised me late in the review was an editorial addition: "slash" fandom (starting with those who create and read fan fiction about Kirk/Spock, and other semi-realistic pairings, as lovers?). I could have phrased the whole thing better [maybe "(most famously, writers and readers of fan fiction about Kirk/Spock as lovers)"], but I can't figure out what "semi-realistic" means.

[We apologize for making the insertion without sending the edited text for approval. Our mistake. We can't figure out what "semi-realistic" means here, either.—DGH and the eds.]

Jerry Kaufman, Seattle, Washington

I'm a fan of Emma Bull's *War for the Oaks*, so I read Dan'l Danehy-Oakes' review with great interest. (Funny coincidence to have a fellow with this last name review this particular book.) I've given some thought to his two—that are one—flaws in *War*.

In the passage he quotes, I think the key is that Bull didn't merely call the armor "harmonious" but "impossibly harmonious." Once a writer uses a word like that in a descriptive passage, there's nowhere concrete to go. We readers are stuck with the job, and we either come up with an image or we simply add a mystical glow and move on. In this passage, there were enough detailed bits and pieces to keep me happy, with that glow added in.

As for the generic flaw, perhaps the flaw isn't in the work, but in the categories Danehy-Oakes uses? I'm not familiar with Farah Mendlesohn (sic—did you know there is another sf critic with a very similar name, Farah Mendlesohn?) or her three fantasy boxes. So I'm arguing with a concept at second hand. But just

because Mendlesohn says that an intrusive fantasy generates meaning by a revelation at the end, it doesn't mean that every fantasy in which the Other intrudes into our world needs to follow this pattern.

On the other hand, maybe if *War* doesn't follow the pattern of an intrusive fantasy properly, then it isn't an intrusive fantasy at all. Maybe it's an immersive fantasy of a strikingly different sort. Maybe the Minneapolis/St. Paul Bull depicts isn't really our world, but only resembles it. Instead, it's an alternate world in which Faery is part and parcel of the "real" world but invisible to it. Then *War for the Oaks* can be a "Tale for its own sake," and Danehy-Oakes can enjoy it more wholeheartedly than he already does.

Catherine Minz, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

I was amused by Michael Swanwick's comment (in *NYRSF* 184) that people would make great pets for artificial intelligences. As he, veteran convention guest, should know, writers already make great rented-by-the-weekend pets—for fans. But perhaps that's what inspired his insight.

William Pugmire, Seattle, Washington

I was especially pleased to see the piece on Fritz Leiber, by James Killian, in the May issue (#189). I got to know Fritz via correspondence in 1976, when I asked him to contribute to a chapbook of tributes I was editing in honor of Carl Jacobi. Fritz's piece was by far the best, and with it he sent a delightfully inscribed paperback collection, which remains one of my cherished possessions. I finally got to meet the towering man when World Fantasy Con came to Seattle, shortly before his death.

Leiber was so remarkable and unique as an artist and thinker. His essays on Lovecraft, so sane and loving, remain my favorites. How I'd love to see an edition of his correspondence. What a wealth of insight into the genre such a book would contain. I've suggested to Norwegian that I'd like to see a panel next year, "An Appreciation of Fritz Leiber."

It's very strange. Although I've hung out with the sf crowd since the late '60s, I've read very little sf. I've been so obsessed with becoming an author of Lovecraftian horror fiction that I simply did not want to be seduced by fantasy or sf. Now and then, when meeting some cool writer at a convention, I would read their books.

Last month changed all of that, when I attended the Nebula Award Weekend. I was so impressed with the friendliness of SFWA, with their dedication to the genre as serious literature, to the aspect of love for writing each other that I witnessed—I was utterly seduced. I wanted so to be a part of it. That was one of the happiest weekends of my life. As a result, I've read Poul Anderson, Greg Bear, and Connie Willis for the first time, and I'm reading my first novel by Elizabeth Hand. I think I've resisted sf for so long because I knew that I'd get hooked, and I didn't want to be distracted from my horror writing.

Well, I am hooked. I can't wait to begin reading Elizabeth Moon, Neal Stephenson, Silverberg, Bova. I may even get over my ire at Ursula Le Guin (whom I've refused to read because of the nasty things she's written about Lovecraft).

I've been haunting the used book shops for Year's Best SF anthologies and *Nebula Award* anthologies, thinking a solid collection of them will give me a good starting point for short fiction.

My writing has gone down the drain. Why waste time writing my not-very-good horror fiction when instead I can spend the remainder of days reading great sf?

I look forward to future issues of your *Review* to be my guide into this delicious new world.

What We Did on the Way to the Future

This is the first issue of our seventeenth year of publication. . . . Whew! We have never missed a month, nor an annual Hugo nomination for Best Semiprozine. To let myself boast a bit, we are still the best general circulation venue in sf for non-academic and personal essays, and one of the best for academic essays. (I do not mean to claim as much excellence as the finest fanzines in the realms of personal essays, just leadership in our category.) I can imagine a day when we might be preempted by on-line publications, but that day has not yet come. And we are one of the best review venues for sf in the world.

However, we encourage more competition. We think there still isn't enough articulate, educated rational disagreement in sf and fantasy (as opposed to expressions of feelings and partisan exaggerations). We enjoy a good rant, sure enough, but don't see a lot of good ones, and believe that the bedrock of genre conversation is argument, not insult, nor shallow assertions of praise, without comparisons and examples. Let us reason together.

We complain from time to time in this column about the need for more volunteer labor; we have just been through a whole year when most of the staff was unable to give as much time as we normally schedule, and need. So payments were processed late, orders filled late, mail answered late, and so forth, because everything was sacrificed to just getting the issue out each month. We have a year and a half of filing backed up at this point, perhaps much more. And we don't do nearly enough to promote more sales and subscriptions. We hope for more help this year, and timelier responses to our friends and subscribers.

One of our pleasures is getting out to conventions and other sf events, and we have done a significant amount of travel and met a lot of you in person, and will surely see more of you before this appears, at the Worldcon in Boston. If you spot us at a convention, come up and say hello. Please recommend articles in *NYRSF* to your friends when we publish something you particularly like. We now have more than 193 cartons of back issues and would like to have them read. And write something for us. We are always pleased when one of our readers contributes to our on-going publication.

It is only seven months until our two-hundredth issue, and we have to start planning something special. ▶

—David G. Hartwell
& the editors



Constance Hartwell, David Hartwell, & James Hartwell wait in Kittery Point, Maine.

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